

## **Book 1 - The Ring**

### **Chapter 1 - Early Morning at a Township**

The town of Wushan. An ordinary little town located within the Kingdom of Fenlai, west of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, the largest mountain range within the Yulan continent.

As the morning sun rose, in the town of Wushan, there remained a slight hint of the cold, pure pre-dawn air. However, virtually all of the citizens of this small town had already come out to begin working. Even the six or seven year old children had already gotten out of bed and were preparing to begin their traditional morning exercises.

On an empty area in the eastern region of Wushan town, the warmth of the rays of the morning sun passed through the surrounding trees, leaving behind scattered spots of light on the empty ground.

A large group of children could be seen there, approximately one or two hundred in number. These children were separated into three groups, each group divided into several lines. All the children stood there silently, their faces solemn. The northernmost group of children were approximately six years old. The group in the middle, approximately nine to twelve years old. The ones in the south, the thirteen to sixteen year olds.

In front of this large group of children, there were three sturdily-built middle-aged men. All three of them wore short-sleeved shirts and roughly cut trousers.

"If you want to be a powerful warrior, then you must work hard from youth." The leader of the middle-aged men, head raised high, hands clasped behind his back, said to them coldly. He swept his cold, fierce gaze across the northernmost group of children. All of those six and seven year olds tightened their lips. Gazing at this man with their big, round eyes, none of them dared to make a sound.

The leader's name was Hillman (Xi'er'man). He was the captain of the guard for the Baruch (Ba'lū'ke) clan, the noble clan which owned Wushan town.

"All of you are commoners. Unlike those noble families, you won't have access to any secret manuals teaching you how to cultivate battle qi [dou qi]. If you want to become someone of worth, if you wish to be respected, then all of you must use the most ancient, most simple, and most basic ways of improving yourselves – through exercising your bodies, and building up your strength! Am I clear?!"

Hillman swept the group of children with his gaze.

"Understood." The voices of the children replied brightly in unison.

"Good." Satisfied, Hillman coldly nodded. The eyes of the six year old children displayed their confusion, while the eyes of the teenagers became very determined. They understood the meaning behind Hillman's words.

Virtually every male in the Yulan continent would exercise very hard from a very young age. If anyone slacked off, in the future, they would be looked down upon by others! Money and power – these were the things that determined a man's status! A man without power would be looked down upon even by women.

If one wanted their parents to be proud of them, wanted women to worship them, wanted to live a glorious life?

Then they must become powerful warriors!

All of them were commoners. None of them would have access to any of those precious manuals which taught the arts of cultivating battle qi. Their only road to glory was through exercising from a young age, and gathering strength! Bitterly hard work! They would work harder than those nobles, spend more of their energy and blood in strengthening themselves!

"When the sun rises in the morning, all things begin to thrive. This is the best time to absorb the natural energy from your surroundings and improve the conditioning of our bodies. Same rules as always – Legs spread apart, as wide as your shoulders! Both knees bent slightly, both hands pressed down at the waist. Assume the 'Qi Building Stance'. When assuming this stance, remember – 'Focus your concentration, maintain a calm mind, and breath naturally.'" Hillman coldly instructed.

The 'Qi Building Stance' was the most simple, yet most effective way of exercising one's body. This was based off of the experiences of generations of forefathers.

Immediately the nearly two hundred children assumed the 'Qi Building Stance' position.

"Remember, focus your concentration, maintain a calm mind, and breath naturally!" Hillman said coldly as he walked amidst the children.

At a glance, he could tell that the teenagers in the southern group all were maintaining the stance calmly and breathed naturally. At the same time, all of them attained the goals of being stable and steady in their stance. Clearly, they had attained some degree of proficiency in the 'Qi Building Stance.'

But glancing at the northernmost group of children, with their waists and knees crooked at odd degrees, their legs relaxed and loose, it was clear to Hillman that they were standing unstably and without any power.

Hillman said to the two other middle aged men, "The two of you, take charge of the south group and the middle group. I will go take care of the youngest children."

"Yes, Captain." The two middle aged men immediately obeyed, paying close attention to those two groups. Every so often, they would kick the legs of those teenagers, checking to see who was standing firmly and who was not.

Hillman walked towards the northern group of children. Those children immediately became nervous.

"Crap, the Head Monster is coming!" A golden-haired child with large, bright eyes named Hadley (Ha'de'li) said in a low voice.

Hillman strode into the midst of the children. Staring at them, his face was cold, but in his heart, he was sighing. "These kids are just too young. They are just too lacking in both wisdom and strength. I can't demand too much from them. However, it's still good to get them exercising from a young age. If they work hard from a young age, in the future, when they are on the battlefield, they will have a higher chance of survival."

And to teach young children...getting them interested was the most effective way! If he forced them too hard, it would have the opposite effect!

"All of you, stand firm!" Hillman coldly harrumphed.

Immediately, all of the children straightened, sticking out their chests and staring straight ahead.

A hint of a smile played at Hillman's lips. He then moved to the front and took off his shirt. The lines running across the powerful muscles on his body made the eyes pop out of all of the kids. Even the children in the middle group and southern group couldn't help but stare at him, admiring his physique.

Aside from his perfect musculature, on Hillman's bare upper body, there were countless knife scars, sword scars, and dozens of other old wounds. All of the children stared at those wounds, their eyes shining.

Knife scars. Sword scars. These were a man's medals!

In their hearts, they were filled with veneration towards Hillman. Hillman, a mighty warrior of the sixth rank, a warrior birthed from life and death struggles! Even in large cities, he would be an amazing individual. In the tiny town of Wushan, he was a man who every single person venerated.

Seeing the ardent gazes of the children, Hillman couldn't help but let a slight smile escape. He wanted to stir up a feeling of worshipfulness in the children, a desire to be like him. That way, they would work harder and be more motivated!

"Let's add some more fuel to the fire!" Hillman secretly grinned, then walked in front of a giant boulder, which weighed three or four hundred pounds.

With one hand, Hillman grabbed the boulder. In a very relaxed manner, he began brandishing it about. That three hundred pound boulder, in Hillman's hands, seemed to be as light as wood. All of those children's jaws dropped, and their eyes widened.

"Too light! Lorry (Luo'rui), if you have some free time after training, go and get some larger boulders for me." With a casual toss, Hillman sent the boulder flying several dozen meters. Crash! It smote the ground next to a large tree, and the entire ground trembled. Hillman casually walked in front of some random stones.

"Hah!"

Hillman breathed deeply. All of the veins on his muscular body popped out prominently, as Hillman directly struck at a nearby bluish boulder. His fist shattered the air, creating a howling sound that made all of the watching children widen their eyes even further. Hillman's mighty fist smashed directly onto the boulder.

Crash! The sound of the fist smashing into the boulder made the hearts of all the children tremble.

That was an extremely hard bluestone boulder!

The bluestone boulder trembled. Suddenly, six or seven giant cracks appeared on it, as with a 'peng' sound, it split into four or five pieces. But on Hillman's fist, not the slightest injury could be seen.

"The Captain is as formidable as ever." Lorry, one of the two other middle-aged men, laughed, as Hillman walked back towards them.

The other man, Roger (Luo'jie), also walked over. Usually, when the children practiced the 'Qi Building Stance', it was time for the three of them to relax and freely chat, while paying attention to any child who decided to slack off.

Hillman laughed as he shook his head. "No way. In the past, when I was in the army, every day I would train like crazy, while on the battlefield, I engage in bloody close combat. Nowadays, all I'm doing is relaxing and stretching my muscles a bit in the morning. I'm not filled with as much energy as in the past."

All of the children stared worshipfully at Hillman.

That huge bluestone boulder was shattered by a single blow from his fist. What sort of power was this? And that three or four hundred pound boulder was so easily tossed with a flick of the arm. What sort of power was this?

Hillman turned his head. Staring at the children, he was very satisfied with the children's reactions.

"Remember, even if you aren't able to cultivate battle qi, in principle, if you reach your body's fullest potential, you can still become a warrior of the sixth rank! And a sixth ranked warrior, upon entering the army, can easily become a mid-level officer, and easily obtain the military manuals which teach one how to cultivate battle qi! Even if you cannot become a warrior of the sixth rank, and can only become a common warrior of the first rank, you will still be qualified to enter the military. Remember! If a man isn't able to become even a warrior of the first rank, that man can't be considered a man at all!"

"If you are a man, then you must raise your chest high, welcome any and all challenges, and fear nothing!"

Upon hearing these words, smiles appeared on the faces of all the six and seven year olds. All of them forced themselves to remain expressionless. These words were Hillman's often-repeated mantra, and he repeated these words endlessly to the children.

"All of you, stand straight. Look at your elders to the south, then look at how you are standing!" Hillman censured them.

All of the six year olds immediately tried to adjust their stance to be more stable.

After a while, the six and seven year olds began to wobble. All of the kids felt that their legs were cramping fiercely, but they gritted their teeth. But after holding out for a short period of time, the children began to collapse and sit on the ground, one after the other.

Hillman's face was cold and callous, but in his heart, he secretly nodded. He was still very satisfied with the performance of these six and seven year olds.

After a short period of time, some of the ten year olds in the middle group also could no longer hold out, and one by one, they began to fall as well.

"Hold out for as long as you can. I won't force you. But if in the future, you are weaker than your peers, then you'll have no one to blame than yourselves." Hillman coldly said.

"Hmm?" Lorry suddenly stared, astonished, at the northern group.

At this point in time, many of the kids in the middle group had fallen down, but in the northern group, a six year old child had held strong.

"This must be Linley's [Lin'lei] first day at training. Who would've thought he'd be so formidable?" Lorry said, amazed. Next time him, Roger and Hillman also noticed. Looking in that direction, they saw that to the north, a single brown haired boy was still holding firm. His lips tightened, the boy stared determinedly in front, both fists tightly clenched so hard that his fists were white.

A look of pleased surprise appeared in Hillman's eyes.

"Good kid!" Hillman secretly praised. Despite being just six years old, he could maintain the 'Qi Building Stance' for as long as the ten year old kids.

Linley, full name Linley Baruch, was the eldest son and heir to the Baruch clan, which ruled over the Wushan town. The Baruch clan was an extremely old clan. Once, it was extremely prosperous, but after thousands of years, it had only three members remaining. The clan leader, Hogg [Huo'ge] Baruch, and his two sons. The elder son was Linley Baruch, six years old. The younger son, Wharton [Wo'dun] Baruch, was just two years old. As for his wife, when she gave birth to the younger son, she died in the midst of childbirth. Linley's grandfather also was dead, having lost his life in battle.

Linley's legs were trembling. Although his willpower was strong, his leg muscles were strained to their utmost and were beginning to tremble uncontrollably. He finally collapsed and sat down.

"Linley, how do you feel?" Smiling, Hillman walked towards him.

Linley cracked a smile, revealing his small canines. "I'm fine, Uncle Hillman." As captain of the Baruch clan's guardsmen, Hillman had watched Linley grow up. Naturally, the two of them were very close.

"Well done. You acted like a man." Hillman patted Linley on the head. Immediately, the hair on Linley's head became tousled like windblown grass.

"Haha." Linley grinned widely. In his heart, he felt very happy at being praised by Hillman.

After resting for a while, they continued their exercises. The training regime for the six and seven year olds was a lot more relaxed. But for the teenagers, the training regime was terrifyingly strict.

The large group of children, including the six and seven year olds, were lying down with their heads and their feet each on top of a flat rock, relying solely on the strength in their waists to keep straight.

"The waist and the thighs form a triangular region." Hillman gestured with his hands to show the area he was describing. "This area is a person's nucleus. Speed and power all come from this triangular nucleus, making this region extremely important."

As Hillman spoke, he continued to walk about, carefully inspecting the youths to see if their movements were correct.

"Tighten that up! Your waists need to be straight!" Hillman thundered.

Immediately, the waists of many youths straightened. This was Linley's first day of training. His tiny head and his feet were both flat on the rocks, but by this point in time, Linley could already feel his waist growing tight and hot.

"Hold, gotta hold. I'm the best!" Linley kept encouraging himself. Linley's body had always been very strong, even as a baby. He had virtually never gotten sick. Given that he also worked very hard, for him to excel was nothing special.

"Thud!" The first child fell down.

However, the stones they were using as a pillow and footrest were only twenty centimeters high, so although the child fell down, it didn't hurt much. (In the Yulan continent, the goldsmiths used standardized lengths of 1 meter = 10 decimeters = 100 centimeters = 1000 millimeters.)

"Thud!" "Thud!" As time went on, more and more children could no longer hold out.

Linley gritted his teeth. He could clearly feel that the tightness in his waist had already reached the limits of his endurance, to the point where it was almost going numb. "My body feels so heavy. I'm almost unable to control it. Hold, gotta hold for just a bit more." By this point in time, of the six to eight year olds, only Linley remained.

Staring at Linley, Hillman couldn't help but be filled with surprise and joy.

"Lorry." Hillman suddenly shouted.

"Captain." Lorry immediately straightened, awaiting his orders.

Hillman commanded, "Tomorrow, prepare some special dyes. When they are practicing their waist strength, put a branch under all of their waists, and dye the branches. If any of them slack off and let their waists touch the branch, their body will be dyed as well. Their training regime will double in difficulty."

"Yes, Captain." Lorry acknowledged the order. He couldn't help but let his lips tug up in a smile. He secretly laughed, "The Captain is always filled with so many devilish ideas. Those punks are really gonna get it now."

Wasn't that just so?

Looks of pain appeared on the faces of all the ten year olds. Normally, they could still make slight adjustments and slack off. But with Hillman's idea, they would have no chance to do so.

Hillman continued coldly, "Let me tell you all, when a warrior practices his battle qi, the battle qi is stored in a fist-sized location directly beneath the navel. You should understand that this is part of the triangle I was talking about. I expect you all now should understand the importance of strengthening the triangle region! This is your core. If it fails, then your body fails, no matter how strong the other parts of it might be."

A good instructor is of paramount importance to the children.

And Hillman really was a formidable warrior. He knew the important parts of training, and also knew how to increase the difficulty one step at a time. He knew what sort of tools to use with what ages. If it was too hard, it could make a child's body collapse.

"Battle qi?"

Upon hearing these words, all of the youths, including the youngest children resting off to the side, stared at Hillman with wide eyes.

All of the commoners were extremely eager to learn battle qi. Even Linley, this scion of a noble house, was extremely eager.

"Thud!"

Linley could finally hold out no longer, but he still used his arms to prop himself on the ground as he slowly rolled off.

"That feels good!" Linley could feel that his waist felt a numbness which pierced through to the bone, so comfortable that his eyes crinkled slightly.

"How long was I able to hold out?" Linley opened his eyes wide, looking around him.

All of the six year olds had collapsed. Even half the ten year olds had collapsed as well. All of the fourteen year olds, however, held on. Hillman's face remained as cold as ever.

"All of you must remember. Your body is like a vessel, like a wineglass. Battle qi is like the wine! The amount of wine a vessel can hold is dependent on the size of the vessel. Same goes for the body; a person's ability to practice battle qi is based on the extent of his training. If his body is too weak, even if he gains access to powerful battle qi manuals, his body won't be able to hold much battle qi, and he still won't become a powerful warrior." Hillman imparted many important bits of advice to the children.

Many warriors, due to not having received proper guidance in their youth, only understood the connection between battle qi and body strength much later in life. But by that age, there wouldn't be much progress when they trained.

Many forefathers had gone on many wrong paths and gained much experience. Hillman continued to impart these experiences, like the spring wind imparting life-giving rain, deeply etching these important experiences in the minds of these children. Hillman didn't want these children to go on wrong paths as well.

After practicing the 'Qi Building Stance', the waist, back, thighs, shoulders, and other parts of the body would be harmonized. Now, almost all of the children were sitting, relaxed, on the ground. Hillman's training program was nearly perfect in the difficulty levels he assessed on each age group.

"Today's training ends now," Hillman announced.

Wushan town's training regimes were regulated. Every day, it happened twice, once at dawn, and once at dusk.

"Uncle Hillman, tell us some stories!" As training ended, the children immediately began to call out. Every day, after the dawn lessons, Hillman would tell them stories of his army days, or some events which had happened on the continent.

The children, all of whom had lived in the town their entire lives, thirsted for stories about the military.

Hillman smiled. He enjoyed telling stories to the children. This was a way to make the kids eager to train. Hillman had always felt that only by making the children voluntarily train would the children have great results.

"Today, I will tell you about the legendary Four Supreme Warrior bloodlines which everyone in the continent knows about." A look of awe appeared on Hillman's face.

The children's ears immediately perked up, and their eyes brightened. Linley, sitting on the ground, felt his heart thump furiously. "The legendary Four Supreme Warriors?" Linley's ears couldn't help but perk up as well, as he stared unblinkingly at Hillman.

In Hillman's eyes appeared a hint of excitement. His voice, however, remained calm. "On our continent, thousands of years ago, there appeared four powerful Supreme Warriors. All four of these Supreme Warriors possessed power comparable to an enormous dragon. They could wander amidst an army of millions at leisure, and easily take the head of any general! These Supreme Warriors were known as the Dragonblood Warrior, the Violetflame Warrior, the Tigerstriped Warrior, and the Undying Warrior!"

"Warriors are divided into nine ranks. I, a mere warrior of the sixth rank, can easily shatter boulders and kick down a large tree! But a ninth rank warrior, even within our country of Fenlai, would be considered a top level expert. But above the ninth rank warriors are the Four Supreme Warriors. They have surpassed the ninth rank warriors and can be considered the pinnacle of warriors. They belong to the level of legendary Saint-level warriors!" Hillman's eyes were filled with excitement. "The legendary Saint-level warriors can melt giant icebergs, make the boundless sea roar with angry waves, make tall mountains crumble, make cities with millions of people collapse, and make meteors fall from the sky! They are absolutely undefeatable, the highest possible power."

Silence. All of the children were stunned.

Hillman pointed at a mountain to the northeast.

"Look at Wushan. Isn't it huge?" Hillman smiled.

After hearing Hillman's words, many of the kids had been scared silly. They all immediately nodded. Wushan was over a thousand meters high, and thousands of meters in circumference. In the eyes of men, it would definitely be considered a huge mountain.

"But Saint-level combatants can destroy Wushan in the blink of an eye." Hillman said firmly.

A sixth-ranked warrior can only smash a boulder. But a Saint-level warrior can smash an entire mountain! All of the children's mouths dropped, and their eyes widened. All of them were shocked, and their hearts were suddenly filled with an unspeakable dread towards these Saint-level combatants. But, their hearts were also filled with longing.

"Destroy a mountain?" Hillman's words had a huge impact on Linley.

After a short period of time, the stunned children returned to their homes. Hillman, Roger, and Lorry were the last to leave. Watching the children depart in clusters of three or five, a smile appeared on Hillman's face.

"These children are the hope and future of Wushan," Hillman said with a smile.

Roger and Lorry also gazed at the group of children. On the continent, virtually all of the children of commoner's had to train hard from an early age. Seeing the kids, Roger and Lorry reminisced back to their own youth.

"Captain Hillman, you are definitely much more formidable than ole Potter of bygone years. Under your guidance, I believe that Wushan town will become the strongest town in our region, surpassing the other ten or so towns," Lorry said with a smile.

The strength of a teacher determined a place's future.

"Oh, Captain, how do you know about the power of Saint-level warriors, or the Four Supreme Warriors?" Lorry suddenly remembered to ask.

Slightly embarrassed, Hillman grinned, "Well, um, actually, I'm not too clear about exactly how powerful the Four Supreme Warriors are. After all, they are the stuff of legends. It's been years since any were seen."

Lorry and Roger were astonished. "You don't have any idea, and yet you lied to the kids?"

Hillman smiled slightly. "Although I'm not clear about the exact strength of the Four Supreme Warriors, I know this – a Saint-level mage maestro, which is to say a mage which has attained the Saint-level, can execute forbidden magical techniques and eradicate an entire army of tens of thousands, or an entire city. Since Saint-level mages are so powerful, I expect that Saint-level warriors can't be that much weaker."

"More importantly, the reason I told the children these stories was to make them work harder. Couldn't you tell how amazed those children were after hearing the stories?" Hillman smiled delightedly.

Lorry and Roger were both speechless.

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"See ya later, 'Ley!"

"See ya, Hadley!"

Bidding farewell to his good friend Hadley, Linley went back, alone, to his home. After walking for a while, he saw the Baruch estates.

The amount of land the Baruch manor was built upon was actually quite large. Moss was growing on the walls, and all sorts of ivy creepers twined up the walls as well. The scars of time were very apparent on the walls. The Baruch manor located in Wushan town was the ancestral home of the Baruch clan. An ancestral home which had existed for over five thousand years and endured countless renovations continued to stand here.

But, with the decline in the clan's fortunes, the Baruch clan's finances had taken a turn for the worse as well. Towards the end, it could only consume its previous gains. Over a hundred years ago, the then-leader of the Baruch clan determined that all the members of the clan would live in the front courtyard, which took up a third of the space of the manor. The rest of the manor would no longer be maintained. That way, a great deal of money could be saved.

But despite these measures, by this period in time, Linley's father, Hogg Baruch, still needed to sell off family possessions in order to keep the family afloat.

The towering doors to the manor were open.

"Saint-level warriors?" While walking, Linley was still thinking about that. "In the future, will I be able to become a Saint-level warrior?"

"Linley." Hillman's voice sounded from behind him. Hillman, Roger, and Lorry had finally caught up to him.

Linley turned around and immediately said happily, "Uncle Hillman!"

Following this, Linley sucked in a deep breath. Raising his head to look at Hillman, his voice filled with eagerness, he said, "Uncle Hillman, are Saint-level warriors

really that powerful? Then what about me? Is it possible that I will become a Saint-level warrior?" In Linley's heart, there was a desire which all children possess.

Hillman was stunned. Besides him, Roger and Lorry were also speechless.

A Saint-level warrior?

"This kid really has the daring to dream big. The country of Fenlai has millions of citizens, but even so, after countless centuries, it hasn't produced a single Saint-level warrior. To want to become a Saint-level warrior..." In Hillman's mind, he fully understood how difficult it was to become a Saint-level warrior.

It required someone to work extremely hard from a young age, the support of a noble clan, and also a high amount of natural talent. It also required luck. How could it be easy to become a Saint-level warrior?

Hillman knew quite well how much he himself had to suffer in order to become a sixth-ranked warrior, and how many life-and-death battles he had to experience. Even a warrior of the sixth rank was very difficult to become. A seventh, eighth, and ninth ranked warrior was of course only harder. As for a Saint-level warrior? Even in his dreams, Hillman didn't dare imagine himself as one.

But he was facing Linley's earnest gaze.

"Linley, Uncle Hillman has faith in you. I'm sure you'll become a Saint-level warrior." Staring at Linley, Hillman spoke firmly. These words of encouragement caused Linley's eyes to shine. In Linley's heart, as well, a desire arose.

A desire which had never been so ardent!

"Uncle Hillman, from tomorrow onwards, can I participate in the training sessions with the ten year olds?" Linley suddenly asked.

Hillman, Roger, and Lorry all stared at Linley in surprise.

"My lord father always told me, if you want to become a man without peer, then you must work harder than other men." Linley unconsciously mimicked his father's manner of speech.

Hillman suddenly smiled. He had seen the results of Linley's training today. Although Linley was only six, his body conditioning could compare with nine year olds. He immediately nodded, smiling. "Fine. However, you'd best not slack off. You'd best realize that this isn't a one day or two day commitment. This will be a long-term regime."

Linley raised his small head proudly. Self-confidently, he smiled. "Uncle Hillman, you just wait and see."

This was a very normal morning for Wushan town. Afterwards, every morning was the same as this one. The group of Wushan youths would follow Hillman, warrior of the sixth rank, and train hard under his guidance. The only difference was, the six year old Linley was placed in the central squad of ten year olds.

## Chapter 2 - The Dragonblood Warrior Clan (part one)

In the blink of an eye, another half year had passed. Training hard and strengthening his body, Linley passed through the gentle, warm spring, the blazing summer, and the chilly autumn. The white poplar tree next to the empty training field of Wushan would always scatter some dried leaves onto the ground whenever the wind blew. The leaves slowly whirled down, covering the entire training ground.

The sky had slowly grown dark.

Today, there was an exceptionally large number of people on the training grounds, nearly three hundred.

"Today's evening training session ends now." Hillman smiled. "Before leaving, however, everyone needs to first congratulate this next crop of children who are about to leave Wushan and join the army."

With autumn's end came the season of military recruitment. With the entire continent engaged in an age of warfare, every youngster viewed becoming a mighty warrior as a badge of honor. Naturally, there were also those who wished to become mages, but becoming a mage is an extremely difficult task. Perhaps only one person in ten thousand had the necessary qualifications to become a mage. With such a low probability, the average person wouldn't even consider it.

Becoming a warrior was much easier. Upon turning sixteen, as long as they were at least warriors of the first rank, they could easily enter the army.

"Uncle Hillman, thank you!"

A hundred and twenty six children, all age seventeen, respectfully bowed towards Hillman. These youngsters normally did not attend training. They had all become adults, and had their own jobs to do. But since they had all been trained by Hillman

since they were toddlers, they all considered Hillman to have been their benevolent master.

Before joining the army, they all came here to say farewell to Hillman.

Staring at this group of energetic, eager seventeen year olds, Hillman was filled with countless mixed feelings. This was because Hillman knew that all of these children were eager to join the army, but after ten years of military service, how many of them would come back alive?

"I hope at least half of these hundred and twenty six will be able to return alive," Hillman prayed silently.

Hillman stared at the children, and said in a clear voice, "Brats, listen up! You are all men of Wushan town. The men of Wushan town must straighten their chests and welcome any challenges, and accept no fear. Am I understood?"

All of those seventeen year old youths straightened their chest, their bodies ramrod straight. Their eyes filled with a hot ardor for military life, they all responded in loud unison, "Understood!"

"Good!" Hillman stood ramrod straight as well. His cold gaze was filled with a military aura.

"Tomorrow, all of you will depart. Tonight, prepare well. I know how strong all of you are. All of you will be able to easily enter the army! I, Hillman, will wait here for all of you to make your glorious return to Wushan town!" Hillman said in a bright voice.

The eyes of those youths shone bright.

Returning home with honor. This was the dream of every youth.

"Now, I order all of you, go home immediately and begin your preparations. Disperse!" Hillman said in a cold, fierce voice.

"Yes sir!"

A hundred and twenty six youths respectfully saluted, and then departed. They were followed by the worshipful gazes of the nearly two hundred youths that remained. Tomorrow, they would begin a brand new journey.

"I have two more years. When I become of age, I also want to join the army."

"I really want to live the exciting, heart-throbbing life of a soldier. If I had to live here for my entire life, in Wushan town, even if I lived forever, it would be pointless."

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A group of thirteen year olds chatted amongst each other. All of them longed for that exciting life, a life filled with vigor. All of them wanted to accumulate merits and establish a reputation. They wanted to be adored by the girls and the esteem of their relatives.

This was their dream!

"Linley, your father, Lord Hogg, has some extremely important business with you. Don't go off playing with the other kids. Come home with me." Hillman walked to Linley's side. Gazing at him, Hillman felt very proud.

Linley was exceedingly smart. Under the tutelage of his father, Hogg, since a young age, he had learned many words and could read most books.

Reading was a very luxurious thing. Usually, only the scions of noble houses could read. The Baruch clan was an extremely old clan, and it held a large number of books.

"Uncle Hillman, I know already. My lord father already reminded me three times. My lord father has never been so insistent about anything. I won't go off and play." Linley grinned, revealing his pearly white teeth, perfect but for the fact that one was missing.

Linley was already beginning to grow permanent teeth.

"That's enough. You are missing one of your front teeth. When you smile, you let the wind in." Hillman laughed. "Go, go home."

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In the ancient front courtyard of the Baruch manor, after the family finished dinner, Linley was playing around with his younger brother.

"Big brother, hug, hug!"

Little Wharton was staring at Linley with a look of pure, simple love. Walking unsteadily, he extended a small, pudgy hand towards Linley, trying to hug him. Linley stood not too far away, quietly waiting for little Wharton to reach him.

"Wharton, you can do it!" Linley encouraged him.

Little Wharton's wobbly footsteps made people fear he would fall with each step. But in the end, little Wharton managed to rush into his big brother's embrace. His smooth skin, as soft as water, was slightly pink. His big round eyes stared at his elder brother, and in a baby voice, he said, "Big brother, big brother."

Looking at his baby brother, Linley's heart was filled with a boundless warmth and love.

No mother, no grandparents. Although he had his father and the family caretaker to take care of him, Linley, who had matured early, was extremely loving and protective towards his little brother. In Linley's eyes, as the big brother, it was his job to take care of his little brother.

"Wharton, what did you learn today?" Linley asked, smiling.

Wharton frowned, an extremely cute expression. After pondering, he excitedly said, "Today I learned about using rags!"

"Rags?" Linley's face revealed an uncontrollable smile. "What did you wipe?"

Counting on his fingers, little Wharton said, "First I used the rags to wipe the floors, then the toilet chamber pots, and lastly I wiped....wiped....right, I wiped the plates!" He looked excitedly at Linley, awaiting Linley's praise.

"You wiped the chamber pots, and then wiped the plates?" Linley's eyes were huge.

"What, did I do it wrong? I really wiped them clean." In little Wharton's tiny head, his eyes were filled with an uncomprehending look as he stared at his big brother.

"Young master Linley, your father is looking for you. Let me carry young master Wharton." A brandy-nosed old man walked over. This brandy-nosed old man was the Baruch clan's housekeeper, Hiri (Xi'li). In the entire manor, aside from the housekeeper, there wasn't even a serving girl.

Linley no longer had any time to chat with Wharton. He immediately handed Wharton over to Grandpa Hiri, and went towards the guest hall.

"I wonder why father summoned me?" Although he was young, Linley could sense that this time, his father had called him for something important.

Entering the guest hall, in one corner there was a desk clock that was higher than Linley was tall.

This desk clock can be considered a high quality object. Generally, only wealthy or noble families had such a clock. At this moment, Linley's father was seated next to the fireplace. The flames in the fireplace burned, constantly crackling and popping.

"Um? Why did father change his clothes?" Seeing his father, Linley was filled with astonishment. While at home, his father normally wore only very simple clothes. Just then, while eating dinner, his father wore normal clothes. But now, he had switched to a set of very noble, beautiful apparel.

Hogg's entire body emanated an ancient, noble aura. That aura wasn't the sort that money could buy. It was something which an ancient noble clan cultivated in its heirs. A clan which had survived for five thousand years. How could an ordinary noble clan compare?

Hogg stood up. Turning around, when he saw Linley, his eyes lit up.

"Linley, come with me. Let's go to the ancestral hall. Uncle Hiri, you know about the matters of my clan, so you can come as well." Hogg smiled.

"The ancestral hall?" Linley was astonished.

The members of the Baruch clan only stayed in the front side of the manor. The areas in the far back, virtually no one went there to clean. Only the ancestral hall in the back did they ever visit, once a month, to clean.

"But this isn't the time to sacrifice to our ancestors. Why are we going to the ancestral hall?" Linley had a belly full of questions.

Exiting the guest hall, Hogg, Linley, and Uncle Hiri, who still held Wharton, followed the blue stone path towards the back manor.

Deep autumn. The night was as cold as water.

The cold wind blowing, Linley couldn't help but shiver. But Linley didn't make a sound, because he could feel that something was different today. Following his father, Linley entered the ancestral hall as well.

"Clack." The door to the ancestral hall closed.

With the candles in the hall becoming lit, the entire hall immediately became very bright. Linley could instantly see the many spirit tablets placed in the very front of the hall. That thick, dense cluster of spirit tablets spoke volumes as to the age of the Baruch clan.

Hogg quietly stood in front of the spirit tablets, not saying a word.

Linley felt very nervous. In the entire hall, aside from the sounds of the whispering candles, no sound was heard. The quiet was terrifying, creating an oppressive feeling on the heart.

Suddenly, Hogg turned and focused his gaze on Linley. In a weighty voice, he said, "Linley, today, there are many things that must be done. But first, let me tell you some of the history of our Baruch clan."

Linley could feel his heart thumping frantically.

"Our clan's history? What can it be?" In his heart, Linley was eager to know, but he didn't dare to make a sound.

A look of pride appearing on his face, Hogg said in a clear voice, "Linley, our Baruch clan has existed for five thousand years. Even scanning the entire Kingdom of Fenlai, I don't believe we can find a second clan which is as ancient as ours." Hogg's voice contained an absolute pride.

Ancient. This was a word which some noble clans viewed with great importance.

"Linley, have you heard of the legendary Four Supreme Warriors of the Yulan continent?" Turning his head, Hogg looked at Linley.

Eyes brightening, Linley nodded. "I know. According to Uncle Hillman, the legendary Four Supreme Warriors are the Dragonblood Warrior, the Violetflame Warrior, the Tigerstriped Warrior, and the Undying Warrior."

Satisfied, Hogg nodded. Smiling, he said, "Right! Now, I am going to tell you something. The Four Supreme Warriors actually represent four ancient clans. And our Baruch clan is the ancient clan which contains the exalted bloodline of the Dragonblood Warriors!"

## **Chapter 3 -The Dragonblood Warrior Clan (part two)**

"The Dragonblood Warrior Clan?!" Linley felt as though his entire head was buzzing.

In Linley's eyes, his clan was nothing more than just an ancient clan which had fallen on hard times. How could it be related to the legendary Dragonblood Warrior?

"You don't believe me?" A trace of arrogance could be seen on Hogg's face. "Linley, go up and take a close look at those spirit tablets. By now, you can read all the words on them. On the back of every single spirit tablet is the history of those departed forefathers. The three spirit tablets at the very top, are three who are Dragonblood Warriors!"

Hogg took Linley by the hand. "Come."

Hogg led Linley towards the area behind the many spirit tablets. Lifting him up, Hogg said, "Take a close look at those characters behind."

Linley widened his eyes and began to read.

The words carved onto the uppermost tablet were etched very deep and very clearly. Those five thousand year old characters told of an astonishing story!

"Baruch, the very first Dragonblood Warrior of the Yulan continent. In the year 4560 of the Yulan calendar, outside the walls of the city of Linnan, Baruch did battle against a Black Dragon and a Titanic Frost Wyrm. In the end, he slew both the Titanic Frost Wyrm and the Black Dragon, causing his fame to be spread across the world. In the year 4579 of the Yulan calendar, along the coastline of the northern sea of the continent, Baruch did battle against a Nine-Headed Serpent Emperor. On that day, the waves crashed unceasingly and nearby cities crumbled, but after a vicious fight lasting a full day and night, Baruch finally executed the Nine-Headed Serpent Emperor....finally, Baruch founded the Baruch clan, and became the first leader of the Baruch clan!"

"Ryan [Rui'en] Baruch, the second Dragonblood Warrior of the Yulan continent. In the year 4690 of the Yulan calendar, in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, he defeated and subdued a Saint-level Golden Dragon, and became known as the Golden Dragonrider Saint! In the year 4697..."

"Hazard [Ha'ze'de] Baruch, the third Dragonblood Warrior of the Yulan continent. Born in the year 5360 of the Yulan calendar, in his very first battle, he fought fiercely with a Saint-level Bloody-eyed Maned Lion in the Mountain Range of the Setting Sun. He defeated the lion, forcing it to scurry away and flee, causing Hazard to become famous throughout the world..."

....

One mighty name after another, one amazing story after another, made the blood in Linley's veins pump all the more vigorously.

"My clan, is actually the clan of the Dragonblood Warriors?" Linley was extremely excited.

Beside him, Hogg said in a low voice, "The first three generations of the Baruch family were all Dragonblood Warriors. Upon becoming a Dragonblood Warrior, one's life expectancy would dramatically increase. The second generation Dragonblood Warrior didn't get married or have children until after he was seven hundred years old."

"And afterwards?" Linley wondered. "Father, why doesn't our clan have any more Dragonblood Warriors?"

Hogg nodded. "To become a Dragonblood Warrior, the most important thing is the density and thickness of the dragonblood which flows in our veins. The higher the density, the better. After many generations, the density of the dragonblood in our veins has grown thinner and thinner. However...that isn't an absolute. Because as time goes on, sometimes, out of nowhere, a descendant will possess a very high density of dragonblood."

"After Hazard Baruch, the fourth Dragonblood Warrior appeared, nearly a thousand years later. And then, after fifteen hundred years passed, which is to say tens of generations later, the fifth Dragonblood Warrior finally appeared in our clan. But in the thousand years from then until now, not a single Dragonblood Warrior has shown up."

Hogg shook his head and sighed. "The fifth Dragonblood Warrior only stayed on the Yulan continent for around two centuries, before he disappeared. In the thousand years since then, our Baruch clan has totally decayed."

After a thousand years, even the most illustrious of families could decay.

"However, our clan still has hope. Perhaps in the future, one of our descendants will have the requisite density of dragonblood in their veins, and meet the requirements to become a Dragonblood Warrior. If they meet the requirements, after just a few decades of training, they would be able to become a true, full Dragonblood Warrior. And at that time, the Baruch clan would once more be restored to the glorious days of yore, when we were known as the Dragonblood Warrior Clan!" Hogg's eyes shone. "Linley, you are six and a half now. According to our rules, at your age, the test to see if your blood has a high density of dragonblood will be fairly accurate. Today, I am going to test you."

Linley was stunned. "Testing the density of dragonblood in my veins? Test me?" Linley fully understood the implications of his father performing this test. This test

would show whether or not he met the requirements for becoming a Dragonblood Warrior.

"Linley, wait here. I'll go get the 'Dragonblood Needle'." Hogg clearly was very excited, as he immediately departed the ancestral hall for a nearby private room.

"Dragonblood Warrior? Will I really become a Dragonblood Warrior?" Linley was mentally fidgeting.

Standing there, Linley's mind was a confused mess. He was filled with both eagerness and fear. He feared that the density of dragonblood in his veins wasn't high enough.

"If I fail, I guess father will be extremely disappointed." Linley couldn't help but think. Having grown up with his father and his younger brother, Linley didn't want to disappoint his father. But the density of dragonblood in his veins wasn't something he could decide.

After just a short period of time, Hogg returned with a twenty-centimeter long needle that was extremely thin as he walked out from the private room.

"Dragonblood Needle?" Linley guessed, as he stared at the long needle in his father's hands.

"Alright, Linley. This needle will just barely break the skin when it goes in. It won't hurt at all. Stretch out your hand." Hogg smiled, and Linley nodded. Taking a deep breath, Linley stretched out his right arm. The slight trembling in his arm showed that Linley really was very nervous.

Not just Linley. To tell the truth, even Hogg was very nervous.

"Hold it." Holding the translucent Dragonblood Needle, Hogg lightly pricked Linley's ring finger with it, easily piercing the skin. Linley felt a piercing pain, and the translucent needle immediately turned crimson as well.

Hands shaking, Hogg immediately lifted the Dragonblood Needle up and inspected it carefully.

Raising his head, Linley stared at his father, feeling extremely agitated. "Is the density of dragonblood in my veins sufficient? Why has father stared at the Dragonblood Needle for so long?" Linley had a bad premonition...

"Sigh..." with an exhaled breath, Hogg placed the Dragonblood Needle off to one side.

Hearing his father's sigh, the nervous Linley knew that the density of dragonblood in his veins clearly didn't reach the required level. His tears immediately began to flow.

"Linley, why are you crying? Don't cry, be good, don't cry." Hogg immediately hugged Linley. Seeing Linley cry, Hogg felt sick at heart. After all, Linley was still just six and a half. He was just a child.

"I won't cry. Yeah. Won't cry." Linley sniffled twice, then forced himself to calm down. "Father, I'm sorry. I've let you down."

Hearing Linley's words, Hogg felt a warm feeling in his heart. He couldn't help but hold Linley against his bosom. "Linley, don't feel bad. I actually didn't raise my hopes too high. Over a thousand years and tens of generations, no one has become a Dragonblood Warrior. It doesn't matter that you also failed. Father doesn't blame you."

Feeling the warmth of his father's chest, Linley's tightened chest gradually loosened.

By this point, the two year old Wharton had long since fallen asleep in Grandpa Hiri's arms.

"Linley, at this point in time, the Baruch family just consists of you, me, and your little brother. I don't have any extravagant hopes. I've never dared to dream of becoming a Dragonblood Warrior." Hogg laughed at himself satirically. How could becoming a Dragonblood Warrior be an easy task?

Linley raised his head, staring at his father.

Linley rarely saw his father speak to him in such a manner. Normally, his father was always very strict and unyielding.

Staring at the rows of spirit tablets, Hogg's eyes were filled with a dreary sadness. "My true goal is actually to recover the ancestral heirloom of the Baruch clan, passed down across the generations."

"Our ancestral heirloom? What's that? Why have I never heard about it?" Linley asked curiously.

Hogg proudly said, "Our ancestral heirloom – the warblade, "Slaughterer". This was the weapon used by the very first leader of the Baruch clan, the very first Dragonblood Warrior of the Yulan continent. Alas...his descendants were unfilial. Six hundred years ago, because of poverty, a descendant who loved luxury actually sold our ancestral weapon for money."

As he spoke, Hogg was filled with so much fury that his body actually trembled.

Shaking his head helplessly, he said, "Afterwards, every single generation tried to recover the warblade 'Slaughterer', but despite six hundred years of trying, none of us have succeeded. After all, when we sold the warblade 'Slaughterer', it was for the price of 180,000 gold coins of gold. 180,000 gold coins of gold! We aren't able to produce such a vast sum, but even if we were, the current owner wouldn't be willing to sell to us."

The ancient clan of the Dragonblood Warriors, actually had sold off its own ancestral heirloom.

This was a humiliation!

The humiliation of the ancient clan of the Dragonblood Warriors!

Every succeeding generation had attempted to come up with ways to regain the warblade 'Slaughterer', but despite six hundred years of trying, they had never succeeded.

As the current clan leader, Hogg also had this desire, but the clan's economic situation was in dire straits. 180,000 gold coins of gold? Even if they sold off the manor and all their possessions, they might not be able to produce such a vast sum.

The ancestral heirloom was lost. This humiliation constantly weighed on Hogg's heart. He felt ashamed and helpless, and unable to face his forefathers.

Seeing the look on his father's face, Linley consoled him, "Father, don't be unhappy! I promise that one day, I will recover our family's heirloom and bring it back to this manor."

"You?" Hogg chuckled. Eyes filled with love, he ruffled Linley's hair.

In his heart, Hogg secretly said, "Linley. Do you know, these words you just said...all those years ago, I said these same words to your grandfather as well." Six hundred years of efforts had all failed. How could it be easy to accomplish? After all, the person who had purchased the warblade 'Slaughterer' couldn't be any ordinary person.

Why would they be willing to sell?

Even if they were willing to sell, how could the decrepit Baruch clan afford the cost?

"Father, you don't believe me?" Raising his head, Linley looked at his father questioningly.

"I believe you, I believe you," Hogg laughed.

Father and son held each other close. Only three members remained of the ancient Dragonblood Clan in this era. When would this decaying clan be able to regain the glory and honor it had in prior years? At this moment, lying against his father's chest, Linley's fists were clenched tightly!

## Chapter 4 - Growth (part 2)

The spring wind came, turning green the poplar trees near the empty space outside of Wushan town. On the empty ground, a group of youths were ardently training. Almost a year had passed since the Dragonblood test, and Linley was eight years old now. Over the course of this period of time, Hillman clearly saw that Linley had only become even harder working!

"Well done, Linley! Hold it, hold it!" Hillman encouraged from the side.

Right now, Linley was only wearing trousers. His upper body was covered with sweat, and his body, as taut as a drawn bowstring, was lying on the ground. His hands were pressed fiercely to the ground, as straight as tree trunks, while the rest of his body was motionless. He was supporting himself from a push-up position, with just his hands and the tips of his toes! His entire body was taut!

The 'Static Tension' training exercise!

A very simple yet very effective training exercise. If a person could reach the level of being able to maintain this pose for an hour, then his body would no longer fear ordinary swords or sabres.

Drip, drip!

Beads of sweat rolled down from Linley's forehead. The sweat entered Linley's left eye, and he couldn't help but wince at the pain.

"Ley is really amazing. Just eight years old, but he's able to match the thirteen year olds in doing the 'Static Tension' exercise." Some of the children who had already given up were sprawled on the ground, chatting as they watched Linley.

"Ley, keep it up! Keep it up for the rest of us! Beat those thirteen year olds!" The golden-haired Hadley shouted from the side.

"Yeah, keep it up, Ley!" The other children started to chant as well.

Linley was on extremely good terms with the other kids. Although Linley was the child of a noble house, he was extremely kind to the children of commoners, and often helped them train as well.

"Gotta hold it. Gotta hold it." Linley constantly said to himself.

In the back of Linley's mind, the words his father said a year ago constantly echoed. "Linley, we are the family of the Dragonblood Warriors. As a member of the Dragonblood Warriors clan, you have an advantage, but also a disadvantage! The advantage is, even though the density of Dragonblood in your veins hasn't reached a sufficient level, your body will still be much stronger than those of most ordinary people. It might be very difficult for others to become a warrior of the sixth rank through training alone, but for you, it will be somewhat easier."

"However, your disadvantage is this. The descendants of the Dragonblood clan are not able to train battle qi according to normal manuals. This is because the blood in our veins is only suited to the training method inside the 'Secret Dragonblood Manual'. It conflicts with all other types of battle qi cultivation methods. Unfortunately, only those who have reached a certain density of Dragonblood are able to practice using the method within the 'Secret Dragonblood Manual'. Therefore, you will not be able to cultivate battle qi at all."

"Also, although in theory, anyone training the body can reach the sixth rank, that's just in theory. In practice, the number of people who accomplish this is very low. But for us, it is different. Even if the amount of Dragonblood in our veins is low, our starting level will be higher than others. Just from training alone, we can become warriors of the sixth rank. Your great grandfather, based on training alone, managed to become a warrior of the seventh rank!"

Linley remembered his father's words very clearly.

Linley growled to himself, "I'm stronger than everyone else now, only because of the Dragonblood in my veins. But since I can't practice battle qi, my only options are to work hard, and to work harder! Since great grandfather was able to become a warrior of the seventh rank, then I shall...I shall become a warrior of the eighth rank. Or even the ninth rank! Nothing is impossible!"

A warrior of the eighth rank!

A warrior of the ninth rank could be considered the most powerful expert in the entire country of Fenlai. A warrior of the eighth rank, although unable to restore the Baruch family to its former glories, would be able to dramatically improve its current situation.

"Gotta hold!" Linley gritted his teeth.

By this point, his muscles felt like they were being chewed on by countless ants. His entire body was quivering, and every single muscle on his entire body trembled. Every single trembling muscle could be seen visibly.

After a long time, in the end...

Thud!

Linley, exhausted, collapsed to the ground.

"That feels wonderful." Flat on the floor, his entire body relaxed, Linley could clearly feel how numb his entire body was. All the muscles on his body, after undergoing that training, were slowly growing. Although the growth wouldn't be noticeable from just one or two exercises, after a long period of time, the effects would be pronounced.

Hillman, off to the side, nodded with satisfaction.

And then, Hillman's face grew cold as he turned to look at the fourteen and fifteen year olds. "All of you had better hold on! Linley's only eight years old, while all of you are almost adults. Don't let an eight year old get the better of you!"

.....

After morning exercises ended, Linley bid farewell to his group of friends and went towards the Baruch clan manor. If a stranger had seen him, the eight year old Linley surely would have been assumed to be eleven or twelve years old, and not just a mere child of eight.

The descendants of Baruch truly were different from other men.

"Big brother!" Upon seeing Linley, the healthy-looking Wharton rushed over.

"That's enough, Wharton. My entire body is covered with sweat. Let me wash myself first." Linley patted Wharton on the face and laughed.

Wharton hmphed. "I know that as soon as you wash up, you'll go take lessons from father."

As a member of a noble house, Linley's education began from a young age. The five-thousand year old Baruch clan was even stricter regarding educational matters than even the royal families of most kingdoms were.

"Enough, Wharton. I'll play with you around noon." Linley laughed.

Wharton was only a child, while Linley was much more mature.

After washing up and changing into some fresh clothes, Linley entered the study. At this moment, his father, Hogg Baruch, was sitting in front of a desk, his back ramrod straight. In front of Hogg were three thick tomes.

"Father!" Linley respectfully bowed.

Hogg coldly nodded, and Linley quickly walked next to him.

"Yesterday, I explained the history of the countries of the Yulan continent to you. Repeat it back to me." Hogg said coldly.

This was the real Hogg.

Instances like the time when he was holding the crying Linley in his arms were extremely rare. Normally, Hogg's attitude towards Linley could be summarized in one word: 'Strict'. In all things, Hogg strove for perfection. He wouldn't let Linley get away with any mistakes.

"Yes, father." Linley said calmly.

"In the Yulan continent, there are three dangerous areas. The number one mountain range, the 'Mountain Range of Magical Beasts'. The second mountain range, the 'Mountain Range of the Setting Sun'. And, the number one forest, the 'Forest of Darkness'. The space these three dangerous regions take up is incomparably large. The 'Mountain Range of Magical Beasts' runs across the entire continent, from north to south, covering over ten thousand kilometers. Within it are countless magical beasts, including Saint-level beasts which have the power to 'destroy the heavens and ravage the earth'. Because of the 'Mountain Range of Magical Beasts', the Yulan continent has been divided into different regions."

"West of the 'Mountain Range of Magical Beasts', there are twelve kingdoms and thirty-two duchies. Within these kingdoms and dukedoms, there are two major divisions. The first is the Holy Union, with the kingdom of Fenlai being the principal kingdom. The second is the Dark Alliance, with the kingdom of Heishi being the principal kingdom. These two alliances are opposed to each other and constantly

battle because one is controlled by the Radiant Church, while the other belongs to the Cult of Shadows."

"East of the 'Mountain Range of Magical Beasts', there are four empires, six major kingdoms, and countless duchies! These four empires are enormous, and are not influenced by the Holy Union or the Dark Alliance. In these four empires, the rule of the emperors is absolute. Any of the four empires are comparable to the Holy Union."

"The four empires are the central Yulan Empire, the southeastern Rhine [Lai'yin] Empire, the eastern Rohault [Luo'ao] Empire, and the northern O'Brien [O'Bu'Lai'En] Empire." After having said all this at one go, Linley let himself relax slightly.

"Just this?" Hogg frowned.

Linley was about to immediately continue, but Hogg cut him off. "Let me ask you, within our Holy Union, how many kingdoms and duchies are there?"

"Within our Holy Union, there are six kingdoms and fifte...sevente..." Linley suddenly frowned.

How many duchies were there in the Holy Union? Linley's memory was a bit hazy. He wasn't sure if it was fifteen, or if it was seventeen. He couldn't be sure.

"Hmph!"

His face cold and harsh, Hogg pulled out a wooden stick, and Linley obediently stuck his hand out.

His eyes narrowing, with a 'WHAP' sound, Hogg whacked Linley's hand with the stick. A red line immediately appeared on Linley's hand, but Linley could only clench his teeth, not making a sound.

"Linley, you must remember, we are currently living within the Holy Union. You must know everything about the Holy Union!" Hogg coldly looked at his son. "In the entire Yulan continent, the most important entities are the four empires and the two alliances."

Linley nodded.

Although his father's words were simple, Linley clearly understood the deeper meaning.

"At the far northern end, the Holy Union shares a border with the O'Brien Empire. While at the southern end, the Dark Alliance intersects with the Yulan Empire. Under the guidance of the Radiant Church, the unity of our Holy Union isn't one whit inferior to that of the empires."

Listening to his father's words, Linley agreed.

Yesterday, he had read many books. Clearly, the Holy Union could be considered the 'cultural center' for the entire Yulan continent. At the same time, in terms of economic strength, it was on par with the Yulan Empire, making the two of them the most economically powerful entities in the world.

In addition, it had the support of the Radiant Church.

The Holy Union truly was very formidable.

"Today, we will study art," Hogg said coldly. "As the descendent of a noble family, you must have a thorough understanding and appreciation of art. Art is what gives noblemen an aura of gravitas!" Hogg pulled out a large tome as thick as a fist, immediately opening it.

"In the year 3578 of the Yulan calendar, the grandmaster stone-sculptor Proulx [Pu'lū'ke'si] was born...."

Off to the side, Hogg solemnly taught while Linley strove hard to memorize. He wanted to meet his father's requirements.

## Chapter 5- Growth (part 2)

Time flew by quickly, and in the blink of an eye, the grandfather clock within the hall rang eleven times, signifying that it was now 11 in the morning.

"Is Hogg at home?" A clear voice rang out. The Baruch manor had no guards, so clearly, this person had already arrived within the manor grounds.

Hogg frowned, placing down the thick tome in front of him. "Linley, today we'll come to a stop here." Revealing a wisp of a smile, Hogg turned around and walked towards the guest hall.

"Ah, Hogg, my dear friend! Just the other day, I heard the clothspinner bird's cry, and I just knew that something good was going to happen. Indeed, by noon, I received your missive, and as soon as I read it, I was overjoyed."

"Dear Philip, I am very happy to see you as well. Hillman, quickly go and bring me the stone sculpture, 'Fierce Lion'. Philip, come, let's go to the main hall and wait. The sculpture will be here shortly."

Hearing these words, Linley felt his heart twinge.

"We're selling off more family belongings?" Linley knew that the 'Fierce Lion' sculpture was one which his father deeply liked. But the Baruch clan, which took very little taxes from Wushan township, really was in dire economic straits.

Fortunately, the Baruch clan was an ancient one, and by virtue of its age, had stored many rare and precious items.

Unfortunately, even the vastest of hoards could not withstand so many years of auctions and sales. By this point in time, the number of valuable items within the clan was very few. Linley couldn't help but turn to stare at the grandfather clock. "I wonder how long it will be before even this clock has to be sold off."

A middle aged man with long, golden hair and a nobleman's aura strode into the hall by Hogg's side. Linley immediately was able to guess that this middle-aged man must be 'Philip'.

"Oh, this adorable child must be your son, right Hogg?" Philip smiled very warmly at Linley. "Linley Baruch, right? May I address you as Linley?"

"It would be my honor, sire." Linley placed his right hand against his breast and respectfully bowed.

"What an adorable child." Philip seemed very pleased.

By his side, Hogg laughed. "Philip, stop wasting time with the child. Look, the 'Fierce Lion' you have desired for so long has arrived." As he spoke, Hillman easily carried in the large sculpture into the hall, and then easily set it down.

It was a nearly thousand-pound stone sculpture, but in Hillman's hands, it seemed like naught but a toy, clearly showing Hillman's strength.

"Mr. Hillman, your strength amazes me. My own manor doesn't have anyone as fierce as you, guard captain, even though I control twelve towns." Philip smiled as he spoke, but the implicit meaning in his words was quite clear; he wanted to invite Hillman to work for him.

Hillman said coldly, "Wushan town is my home, sire."

"Forgive me." Philip quickly apologized.

Philip turned to look at Hogg. "Hogg, I must say, although I like this stone sculpture very much, the artisanship of this 'Fierce Lion' sculpture cannot be considered to be top tier, much less the masterpieces of those grandmaster sculptors."

"Philip, if you don't wish to buy it, then forget about it." Hogg was quite succinct.

Philip's eyes couldn't help but narrow, but then he laughed. "Haha...Hogg, don't be angry. I'm not saying that I don't wish to buy it. I'm just telling the truth. How about this. I'll buy this sculpture for five hundred gold coins. What do you think?"

"Five hundred?" Hogg frowned.

This price was much lower than what Hogg had hoped for. He had been hoping for at least eight hundred.

In the Yulan continent, one gold coin equaled ten silver coins equaled a thousand copper coins. The average commoner would be able to earn twenty or thirty gold coins in a year. Even the average army soldier would only earn a hundred or so gold coins.

"The price is too low." Hogg shook his head.

"Hogg, you must know that in all the ten thousand plus years of the Yulan continent, there have been countless sculptures made. The true value of a sculpture is in terms of its artisanship. As far as the artisanship of this one....well, heh, suffice to say, I just like it. Five hundred gold really is my highest offer. If you don't accept, then let's just forget about it."

Philip laughed as he turned to look at the grandfather clock in the hall. His eyes gleaming, he said, "Hogg, if you were to sell this clock, however, I would be willing to pay a thousand gold."

Hogg's face grew cold.

"Ahem, two thousand gold would be acceptable as well. This would be my highest offer." Philip hurriedly said.

Hogg sternly shook his head firmly. "The grandfather clock is not for sale! As for the sculpture, six hundred gold. Take it or leave it."

Philip carefully studied Hogg for a moment, then chuckled. "Fine, Hogg. I'll give you some face. Six hundred gold it is. Housekeeper, bring me six hundred gold."

The caretaker for his manor, who had been waiting outside the entire time, immediately ran over with the gold.

Six sacks of yellow gold.

"Six hundred gold, Hogg. You can count it, if you want." Philip smiled.

Hogg hefted the sacks. Just based on weight alone, Hogg was certain that there really were six hundred gold coins in them, a hundred gold per sack. Hogg smiled and nodded. "Philip, how about staying and having dinner with us?"

"No need, I still have some business back home." Philip laughed.

Philip's housekeeper subsequently instructed two powerfully built warriors to lift and carry away the sculpture, which they did with difficulty.

After Philip and his entourage had departed, Hogg stared at the six sacks of gold, a dim look in his eyes. This time, he sold the stone sculpture. Next time? Although the manor still had many things remaining, sooner or later, they would have nothing left.

"Father, I want to learn to be a sculptor!" Linley suddenly said.

Linley knew very well that in the Yulan continent, those famous master sculptors could produce works valued at tens of thousands of gold pieces each. Some famous sculptures could even reach a hundred thousand gold pieces. And wealth aside, the societal ranking of these sculptors was also very high.

"If I can become a master sculptor, then...then father will no longer have to sell our family possessions." This is what Linley was thinking.

"Sculpting?" Hogg glanced at Linley, his eyes cold.

"Linley, do you know that amongst the hundreds of millions of people in the Holy Union, there are at least several million who have studied sculpting. But in the entire Holy Union, the number of true masters can be counted on one hand. In addition, if you don't have a good instructor, you simply cannot succeed on your own."

"The inner circle of sculptors is not one which ordinary people are allowed into. You only see the sky-high valuation of the works of the masters, but do you know that the vast majority of sculptors only make a few dozen gold coins each year?"

Hogg's voice was very fierce.

Linley was so frightened, he immediately knelt down. Just now, he only spoke because he thought that sculpting could improve his family's situation. He didn't expect his father to say so much and lecture him so sternly.

"Enough. The ancestral hall needs some cleaning. After lunch, go and clean it up." Hogg said coldly.

"Yes, father." Linley said respectfully.

Looking at Linley, Hogg sighed in his heart. "Sculpting? Oh, child. Do you know that in the past, I also practiced sculpting? I spent ten full years of my life trying to learn. But unfortunately, my sculptures weren't worth a single coin." Hogg, too, had once foolishly dreamed of becoming a master sculptor and thereby improving his clan's situation.

But in his heart, he felt very helpless. Despite spending ten years training, his sculptures were still worthless. The field of sculpting could be described as a pyramid.

Those famous master sculptors were at the top of the pyramid. They enjoyed a high status, and each sculpture they made was worth hundreds of thousands of coins.

But the valuation of the work of the countless low level sculptors at the bottom of the pyramid was soul-crushingly low. Most of their works would just be bought by commoners for just a few silver coins to use as decorations in their homes.

## Chapter 6 – Coiling Dragon Ring (part 1)

Underneath the setting sun, the rosy clouds seemed to cover half the sky, casting their red hue upon the entire world.

"Cleaning the ancestral hall is pretty easy."

Departing the ancestral hall, Linley had to admit that he had over-prepared. He had slotted an hour for this job, but in just fifteen minutes, he was finished cleaning.

On the Yulan continent, each year was divided into twelve months, each month thirty days, each day twenty four hours, and each hour sixty minutes. Most noble families owned grandfather clocks, and were able to accurately tell time. Some extremely wealthy or extremely high-status individuals might even own meticulously calibrated wrist watches.

"The ancestral hall is cleaned every month. Frankly speaking, in just a month, the ancestral hall won't get too dirty. All I have to do is just casually wipe it down. I have almost an hour before training starts. What should I do?" Bored, Linley looked around in all directions.

The ancient Baruch mansion had five thousand years of history.

The front courtyard was cleaned every day, but the rooms in the much-larger back courtyard, aside from the ancestral hall, were all covered in dust, and even the walls were cracked. Wild grasses and dark green lichen covered the floors and even ran up the walls.

"Heeeeey..." Seeing the decrepit architecture, Linley's eyes slowly brightened. "Lots of places in the back courtyard haven't been visited in over a century. I wonder if there's any ancient, valuable items there?"

Upon coming to this realization, Linley's heart began to pound.

"If I am able to find some valuable things and give them to father, no doubt he will be very happy." Linley took a deep breath, then immediately entered a decrepit room next to the ancestral hall. Step by step, he walked carefully, wielding a sturdy wooden stick in his hands, which he used to strike down the cobwebs, allowing himself a more careful examination.

Immediately upon entering the room, a rotten scent wafted past Linley's nose. Thick cobwebs could be seen in each corner, and spiders could even be seen clambering about.

Many spiderwebs were covering decorative curtains and furnishings. Upon closer examination, all of these curtains appeared very ancient. Unfortunately, the curtains were tattered beyond belief, just barely holding together in the semblance of a curtain.

"If these curtains weren't ruined, no doubt they would be worth a lot of money." Linley helplessly shook his head. He continued to inspect the room, using his stick to brush aside the layers of cobwebs as he carefully searched.

He searched the floor, the cabinets, and even to see if there were any secret passageways on the walls.

"According to the books I've read, it is quite common for walls to contain hidden levers or passages." Linley carefully rapped the walls, listening to the sounds.

Linley very much enjoyed this feeling of searching for treasures in the ancient room. But he had forgotten something. If he could come up with this idea, wouldn't his father, his grandfather, and the other elders of the Baruch clan also have thought of this?

These ancient rooms had long ago been scoured clean by the deceased elders of the Baruch clan.

Linley was only eight years old, after all. Although the strict education of the clan helped him mature quickly, there was still a large gap between him and an adult. Naturally, he wouldn't be able to consider things from a more complete point of view.

"Nothing in this room. Next one..." Linley exited the first room and entered the second.

There were actually many rooms in the back courtyard. After all, the front courtyard which Linley resided in constituted only a third of the entire manor. The back courtyard was far larger. Linley would probably have to spend an entire day in order to finish searching the entire back courtyard.

"All these decorations are ruined. There isn't a single one worth money." Linley exited yet another empty room.

He stared up at the sky.

"Eh, looks like it's almost time for training. I have another fifteen minutes or so at most." Linley turned his head around and stared at an extremely large room. "I'll just look at that last one, that big one. I'll spend about ten minutes searching. If I can't find anything, I'll go off to training."

Having made up his mind, Linley raced towards the large room.

This ancient room was much larger than even the main hall in the front courtyard. Stepping inside, Linley carefully scrutinized the place. "I bet hundreds of years ago, this was the dinner hall for our Baruch clan." From the ornaments and furniture, Linley could tell that this was a living hall.

A huge, grandiose-looking hall.

"Search the ground first."

Same as before, Linley lowered his head, widened his eyes, and began carefully searching the room one part at a time. Upon seeing anything interesting, he would

tap it twice with his stick. If it was made out of stone, he would ignore it. Since he didn't have much time left before training was to start, his searching speed increased as well.

"Time to search the walls and the curtains. Oi. Last, best hope." Linley grimaced as he scanned the surroundings. "Clan elders, I really hope you guys left one or two things behind for me to find. Even if it is just a small thing."

Linley carefully searched the walls, even peeking behind the tattered curtains.

On the ancient walls were many rotted wooden cabinets, each of which had many drawers. Linley pulled open each and every drawer, but the drawers were totally empty, almost immaculately so. The only thing inside of them? Some dust.

"Alas!"

After pulling open the last drawer, Linley felt bitter disappointment in his heart.

"After searching for all this time, I didn't even find a single valuable item. All I did was cover myself with sweat and dust." Linley stared at his clothes. They really were filthy, now. Linley couldn't help but feel discontented.

Linley's gaze once more flashed across the room.

"Hmph. I'm leaving." Linley angrily used the stick in his hand to strike hard against a nearby cabinet, as though he wanted to give vent to all the anger which had built up over an hour of fruitless searching.

"Thud!" The stick solidly struck against the cabinet.

The cabinet was extremely ancient. After having been chewed on by mites for a hundred years, it couldn't withstand any weight. After having been struck so fiercely, it began to creak and groan.

Hearing this, Linley couldn't help but look behind him in alarm. "Oh no, it's going to collapse!" While searching the other rooms, Linley had also destroyed a few other pieces of furniture, so by now, he was very experienced.

Linley hurriedly dodged to one side.

In the end, the cabinet, which was twice as tall as Linley himself, collapsed. With a crashing sound, the cabinet smashed against the floor, breaking into seven or eight pieces, covering the room with even more dust. But hidden amidst the dust, unseen by Linley, was...

Upon the shattering of the cabinet, a black ring which had been hidden within the wooden supports came tumbling out, falling to the ground.

"Ew, ew!" Linley spat out the two words as he hurriedly tried to escape the wave of dust.

"How unlucky! My entire body is covered with dust now, and I bet training is about to start. I'd best go take a quick shower and put on some new clothes." With a wave of his arm, Linley pushed open the door and departed the ancient room.

## Chapter 7 – Coiling Dragon Ring (part 2)

That black ring had rolled forward, landing precisely in front of the doorway.

When Linley had strode forward by three steps, reaching the doorway, he came to a sudden halt, because he could clearly feel that he had stepped on something hard.

"Just now, I searched the ground and didn't see a single rock. This must have come from the shattered drawers." Thinking about the collapsed drawers, Linley couldn't help but feel angry, and he viciously stomped on the piece of 'shattered wood' beneath his feet.

Based on Linley's thinking, if it was a piece of shattered wood, it should be stomped into fragments. But in reality...

"Whoah, it's hard! What's under my foot?" Linley felt that the item underneath his foot was extraordinarily tough, and immediately stepped aside to take a closer look.

He saw a jet-black object in the shape of a ring lying peacefully on the ground. It was covered by a layer of dust, and was not at all catching to the eye.

"Oh, a ring?" Linley's eyes were bandit-sharp. He happily plucked the ring up, then used his filthy sleeves to give the black ring a vigorous rub-down. Only then could Linley make out what this item really looked like.

This black ring was made of a material that seemed to have properties of both wood and stone. On the body of the ring, there was a very faint carving of an indistinct object as well...

"Earthworm?" Linley suspiciously looked at the carving on the ring.

At first glance, Linley felt that the sinuous carving on the ring seemed to be that of an earthworm.

Linley laughed to himself, "The carving skill for this ring is really terrible. I bet even an average carver could make something more attractive. Alas, what a waste. This black ring doesn't even have a single diamond on it, much less any valuable magic crystals."

Most rings were adorned with either diamonds or magic crystals.

Unfortunately, this black ring seemed to have been made out of a material that had properties of both wood and stone. Not even the shadow of a gemstone could be seen. Clearly, it was worthless.

But for some reason, upon seeing the ring, Linley immediately felt that he had taken a liking to it. He suspected that it was most likely because this was the only thing he had discovered after spending a prodigious amount of effort in searching the manor.

"Hm, this ring is really thick. There's no way to wear it on my finger without it slipping off. I'll string it through with silk and wear it around my neck." Linley's eyes brightened.

The eight-year old Linley's hands, after all, were much smaller than the hands of an adult. There was no way he could wear the ring on his fingers.

"Now, what name should I choose for this black ring? Earthworm Ring? No way, that sounds terrible." Linley mumbled for a few moments, then his eyes lit up.  
"Haha, that sinuous object can also be considered a 'dragon', right? A dragon curled around the ring...then let's call it, the Coiling Dragon Ring!" Although in his heat, Linley felt like the carving looked more like an earthworm, but he still chose the name 'Coiling Dragon Ring' for it.

"Coiling Dragon Ring!" Lifting up the dark, unadorned ring, Linley felt exceptionally pleased.

"Wait, crap! It's almost time for training!"

Linley suddenly remembered. He frantically stared at his filthy clothes, covered in dust and grime. He looked like a beggar. "Oh no..." Linley had no time to think. He immediately ran out of the ancient courtyard and charged straight for the washroom.

The sound of rushing water.

Linley dumped water over himself. His skin was bright and vigorous, and muscular lines were already beginning to develop. This was the result of Linley's training. Underneath the rushing water flow, the dust was quickly washed away.

Using the least amount of time possible, Linley washed himself clean, then hurriedly put on his training clothes.

"String, string..." Linley hurriedly looked about for a thread on which he could hang the Coiling Dragon Ring. Suddenly, Linley's gaze fell on a ruined old washcloth. His eyes lit up, and he immediately pulled a string out from within the washcloth.

Although the washcloth was very ordinary, it was very sturdy and durable. The string, too, would be very resilient.

He quickly strung on the Coiling Dragon Ring, then immediately wore his makeshift necklace.

"I'm gonna be late. This is my first time being late!" Linley bolted out like a roaring flame. As he ran, he tucked the Coiling Dragon Ring into his clothes. Feeling the coolness of the ring against his chest, Linley couldn't help but feel happy.

In exchange for being late, he gained the Coiling Dragon Ring.

Linley felt very happy.

In a flash, Linley rushed out of the Baruch clan manor, and then immediately ran towards the empty training ground east of Wushan town. By this time, most of the commoners had already returned home, leaving the streets empty, but as they saw Linley run, they were able to guess the reason.

"Young master Linley, careful, don't hurt yourself!"

"Master Hillman is extremely rigorous. I'm afraid young master Linley is going to be punished."

.....

The kindness which the Baruch clan had showed the commoners caused them to also be filled with love and goodwill towards Linley.

"How will Uncle Hillman punish me?" Even as he hurriedly rushed forward, Linley was still thinking about this question. At this point, Linley had no time to chat or

pay respects to any of the uncles or aunties nearby. In a short period of time, Linley arrived at the training field of Wushan town.

By this time, all three squads had already lined up. Hillman was speaking, but upon hearing Linley's footsteps, Hillman's cold gaze couldn't help but shoot towards him.

Linley ran towards the training squads. Taking position next to the squads, he nervously awaited Hillman's instructions.

"Today's training exercises will be doubled for you. Return to your team!" Hillman calmly said.

"Yes sir!" Linley raised his head high and said in a bright voice.

The youngsters nearby couldn't help but stick out their tongues. He was just late by a short amount of time, but was punished with double duty training. Today, Linley probably wouldn't have any time to go home and eat dinner.

Just as Linley began jogging towards his usual position in the team, suddenly...

THUD! The entire earth seemed to tremble slightly, but with regularity. It was as though a giant creature was walking on the earth, causing it to tremble with each step.

"East. It came from the east." Linley immediately discerned the direction.

Not just Linley. Hillman, Roger, and Lorry all turned towards the east, their expressions growing solemn. The vibrations were growing stronger and clearer. All of the youths present could clearly feel that the regular vibrations were coming from an enormous creature headed their way.

Each of the thunderous footsteps seemed to caused a vibration powerful enough to shake Linley's heart.

What giant creature was causing this?

Linley widened his eyes and stared east...

## **Chapter 8 – Magical Beast – Velocidragon!**

The giant creature that caused the earth to shake finally revealed itself.

Upon seeing this enormous creature, Linley and the rest of the children were scared silly. Hillman, Roger and Lorry's reaction speeds were very quick; they immediately stood in front of the group of kids and carefully watched the enormous creature.

"A magical beast of the seventh rank. Velocidragon\*!" Hillman's facial expression contorted, while Lorry and Roger, by his side, felt their legs grow weak.

"So bi, bi, big! Is, is this a legendary magical beast?" Linley was totally stunned.

Since he was born, the largest creature which Linley had ever seen was the warhorses that sometimes passed by Wushan township. Those large, powerful horses were 1.8 meters tall. But in front of this giant creature, they seemed like nothing more than a babe in front of a giant. The difference was truly astounding.

This creature was easily two stories high and at least twenty or thirty meters long.

### Magical Beast – Velocidragon!

The Velocidragon's entire body was covered by huge, fire-red scales, each scale glittering with the reflected cold, golden light. The scales alone were stunning and frightening to behold. The Velocidragon's four scale-covered long legs were even more terrifying in their thickness. Two fully grown men would barely be able to surround them with their arms. The flame-red Velocidragon was entirely crimson in color, with the exception of its cold, deadly looking black claws.

The Velocidragon's long, scale covered tail made up over half of its total body length. Like a whip, it swept across the ground. Each time it struck the ground, a deep thud could be heard emanating from below.

"Grrr..."

With a low-throated growl, white steam erupted from the nostrils of the Velocidragon, carrying with it the stench of sulfur. Those diamond-like eyes, nearly the size of a lantern, were also, strangely enough, red as well. The huge head of the Velocidragon turned towards Linley and the children. Its cold gaze terrified all of the children, freezing them in their tracks.

"Tchhh. Tchhh." The Velocidragon's mouth tensed, revealing two rows of enormous, saw-like teeth. Each tooth was ivory white, and the sight of them caused everyone's hearts to grow cold. No one dared to question its sharpness.

Linley felt as though his heart had stopped beating. Right now, it seemed as though all sound had faded away.

"Too terrifying. Is there anyone who can possibly defeat such a creature?" Linley was scared stiff.

Just from looking at this huge magical beast, Linley felt as though its power was irresistible. Linley believed that with but a swipe of its enormous tail, most likely even the sturdiest stones of the houses of Wushan town would be disintegrated.

"Is this Wushan town?" Suddenly, a cold voice emanated from on top of the Velocidragon.

All of the terrified children looked up, astonished. Upon the Velocidragon's enormous, scaly back, a mysterious man wearing violet robes was sitting cross-legged. The Velocidragon was simply too huge in size, and its back was extremely broad. There was more than enough space for someone to stand, sit, or even roll around.

"Lord Magus, this is indeed Wushan town. Is there anything we can help you with, Lord Magus?" Hillman's voice rang out.

Upon hearing Hillman's voice, everyone seemed to find their bearings again, and recovered from the state of stunned terror. But everyone present, including Roger and Lorry, didn't dare make a single sound. They all stood behind Hillman and fearfully looked at the terrifying Velocidragon and the mysterious, violet robed magus.

"Wushan town. Looks like I didn't get lost." The violet-robed man said in a low voice.

And then the mysterious, violet-robed man didn't say anything else. After gazing at Linley and the rest of the group with its cold eyes, the Velocidragon continued forward, two more lines of smoke appearing from its nostrils. Seeing the Velocidragon go in the direction of the township, the expression on Hillman's face changed.

"Everyone, stay here." After he spoke, Hillman immediately chased after the departing Velocidragon.

"Uncle Lorry, what is that? Is that a magical beast?" Linley was the first to ask.

Lorry cleared his throat, a look of terror still in his eyes. But he still nodded. "Yes, it is. But it's a very powerful one, a magical beast of the seventh rank. A Velocidragon!"

"Velocidragon?"

Linley memorized the word, forever etching it in his mind.

The Velocidragon's huge body, hard scales, sharp claws, and powerful tail served to create a terrifying appearance. Linley believed....a single Velocidragon could most likely annihilate the entire Wushan township.

"The defensive power of the Velocidragon's scales is astonishing, and its attack power is terrifying as well. In addition, it is proficient in destructive fire magic!" Lorry's heart was filled with fear as he explained to Linley and the others. "If faced with a terrifying magical beast such as the Velocidragon, most likely even a platoon of a thousand soldiers would be wiped out, unless it had a number of sixth or seventh ranked warriors and magi who could unite to penetrate the Velocidragon's scales."

Linley's heart trembled.

Even a platoon of a thousand soldiers would be wiped out?

"However, the most terrifying thing is not the Velocidragon...it is the mysterious violet-robed man." Lorry took two stabilizing breaths, calming his agitated heart.

By his side, Roger nodded as well. "Right. In order to subdue a Velocidragon, one must force the Velocidragon to willingly submit to being a servant. In other words...the violet-robed man must be significantly more powerful than the Velocidragon. Based on his clothing, he should be a magus."

"At least a magus of the seventh rank. Perhaps even a magus of the eighth rank!" Roger's fists couldn't help but tremble as well. "I never imagined such an important individual would come to our home."

Linley could also feel the fear which was in the hearts of Roger and Lorry.

Velocidragon, a magical beast of the seventh rank. And a mysterious magus whose power dwarfed that of the Velocidragon? This definitely was enough to cause terror.

"The magus was even more powerful than the Velocidragon?" Linley found this somewhat hard to believe.

The Velocidragon's huge body, hard scales, sharp claws, and powerful tail...all seemed to dwarf that small human figure of the magus.

"Roaaar!"

Suddenly, an angry roar erupted from the middle of the township.

"Crap!" Lorry and Roger were stunned. Linley and the other children grew worried as well. Was the Velocidragon's angry roar caused by Uncle Hillman, or by Wushan township? Nobody knew.

"All of you, stay here." Lorry and Roger, although terrified, still raced towards the center of the town.

Linley gritted his teeth. "Uncle Hillman!" Linley was also worried for Uncle Hillman, as well as the citizens of Wushan town. He also ran in that direction. At this moment, Lorry and Roger were both panic-stricken at the thought of the Velocidragon, and didn't notice Linley following behind them.

In but a few moments, they arrived in the middle of the town. Hillman was standing far away, watching.

"Why did you come?" Hillman reprimanded in a severe tone.

But upon seeing Linley follow behind Lorry and Roger, Hillman frowned even further. "Linley, it's far too dangerous here. Go back immediately." Only now did Lorry and Roger notice Linley had followed them.

"Linley, why did you..." Lorry and Roger didn't know what to say.

"Uncle Hillman, I'm not going back." Linley wasn't willing to return.

Hillman helplessly shook his head. He knew how stubborn Linley could be, and how hard it was to force him to change his mind. "Fine. Then stay behind me, do not go too far. As long as you stay next to me, I am confident that I can protect you."

"Thank you, Uncle Hillman. I definitely won't run around." Linley was overjoyed.

At this point in time, Hillman's group was roughly a hundred meters away from the Velocidragon. They quietly watched the events in the center of town unfold. In front of the huge Velocidragon, a group of youngsters could be seen. Four men, three women.

## Chapter 9 – Magical Beast – Velocidragon! (part 2)

"Captain, what's going on up ahead?" Lorry said in a quiet voice to Hillman.

A hint of a smile played at Hillman's lips. "That mysterious magus seems to be at odds with that party over there. Just stay here and watch. No need for us to interfere."

Hillman himself was only a warrior of the sixth rank. In truth, he didn't dare to interfere either.

The Velocidragon alone was something he would not be able to fight off, much less the mysterious magus.

The strength of the seven-man party in front of the magus was not weak either. Five of them were warriors, while the other two were magi. The leader of their party was a powerfully built man with tousled red hair, who rode a pitch-black iron bull. The two sharp horns of the iron bull glittered under the light, dark and deadly.

Its blood-red eyes gave testament to the true nature of this bull – “Vampiric Iron Bull”, a magical beast of the fifth rank.

With a snort, smoke began to emit from the bull's nostrils as well.

Of the seven people in the party, four were men, three were women. Both of the magi were women, while the third woman was an archer. Aside from the Vampiric Iron Bull, a huge griffin floated in mid-air.

“Griffin” – a magical beast of the fourth rank!

It had the head of a lion, but a pair of enormous, powerful wings. For a party to have two magical beasts and two magi, clearly this adventuring party was no ordinary one.

“Youngsters, it'd be better if you handed the [De'Pei'Luo'Ying] d'Bero shadow diamond over.” The mysterious man seated on the Velocidragon said a second time, his voice cold.

“Lord magus, we don't wish to be your enemy, but in order to acquire this d'Bero shadow diamond, we spent countless amounts of time and effort. The value of it exceeds a hundred thousand gold coins, but you, lord magus, want to buy it from us for just seven hundred coins. This...this is impossible.” The red-headed leader of the group said in a solemn voice.

Listening to the conversation from far away, Linley, by Hillman's side, now understood everything.

So this mysterious magus wanted to spend seven hundred gold to purchase this d'Bero shadow diamond which was worth a hundred thousand.

“Wow, the price of that diamond...” Linley was shocked. “For it to be worth so much money, clearly this d'Bero shadow diamond must have some significance

attached to it. Otherwise, it wouldn't cause this magus to be willing to lower his status and try to forcibly buy it."

An offer of seven hundred gold, for an item worth a hundred thousand. No wonder the small party was unwilling to accept.

"Hmph." The mysterious magus coldly harrumphed.

"I only have seven hundred gold on me. Right now, I'm still willing to use money to buy it from you. If you lot don't know how to take a few steps back and do what's best for you...then not only will you not receive a single gold coin, you will also lose your little lives." The magus' said in a frozen voice.

"Grrrrrrrr."

The Velocidragon, taller than most of the houses in the town, let out a deep growl, causing all the houses nearby to shudder.

"Captain, we risked our lives to obtain this d'Bero shadow diamond. How can we so easily cower in front of this guy and give it away?" A woman in black said coldly. As an experienced adventuring party, these seven people had experienced many battles and wouldn't easily submit.

The red-haired captain said in a solemn voice, "Honored lord magus, I am of the Kingdom of Fenlai's 'Cayley' clan..."

This captain wanted to use his background to force the opponent down.

But unfortunately, powerful magi usually were eccentric and didn't give a whit about noble families.

"You all have chosen death." The mysterious magus sneered coldly.

"Careful." In a flash, the seven person party raised its guard. The four warriors charged in front, the female archer in behind pulled out her strongest bow, and the two female magi began to prepare magic.

"ROAAAAR!"

The huge Velocidragon opened its mouth, and an enormous plume of fire erupted from its fangs, headed directly for the party.

Where the fire came near, the very stone road underneath the fireblast began to warp, crack, and even shatter from the intense heat as the entire road charred black.

“Careful.”

The red-haired leader said in a deep voice, as his entire body became suffused with red-colored battle-qi. The other three warriors activated their battle qi as well.

The red-haired leader wielded an enormous claymore in his two hands. With rapid speed, he fiercely swung it against a nearby stone wall, and with a thundering sound, the stone wall collapsed, as hundreds of rocks rolled down to the floor and dust exploded outwards.

Just at this time, the fire from the Velocidragon enveloped the four men, who used their battle-qi to resist it.

“Hah!”

The red-haired man kicked a large rock nearly half a meter long at the magus.

The other three warriors did the same, also kicking large rocks with the speed and power of enormous slingshots. The four rocks split the air, howling as they pierced forth towards the magus seated on the huge Velocidragon.

“Swish! Swish! Swish!”

One after another, a barrage of rocks assaulted the magus. In the twinkling of an eye, all the rocks from the collapsed wall were used up.

Seeing this battle from afar, Linley’s hands were tightly clenched.

“How incredible. They actually dare to use their feet to kick such huge rocks.” Watching the four men unceasingly kick the huge rocks, he felt all the more in awe of warriors in general. “Although, the Velocidragon is even more terrifying!”

Staring at the Velocidragon, Linley watched as its whip-like tail snapped about, dancing in front of it.

“Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!”

One giant rock after another was smashed into smithereens. The rocks couldn’t even come close to harming the magus on the Velocidragon’s back.

“Swoosh!” The Velocidragon’s tail seemed to be totally unimpeded. It covered an enormous area, and whenever it casually passed by a stone house, it sliced through it as though the house was made of mud. The stones would be shattered without any resistance. As one house after another began to collapse, stones rolled about everywhere and the entire area was bathed in dust.

"Roaaaar!" Even in the middle of the dust storm, the Velocidragon's mighty roar could be heard, and it continued to vomit fire from its jaws.

This entire time, the two female magi in the back of the party were continuously mumbling magical incantations in a light voice. The words of magic were totally different from the common tongue spoken on the Yulan continent. It was much more awkward-sounding and complex. Before too much time had passed, the two female magi finished their incantations!

"Protective Icy Carapace!"

The two female magi chanted out in a low voice. Bright light erupted from their bodies, with four rays covering the four male warriors with a translucent, crystalline armor.

The red-haired leader was delighted. With the protective icy carapace supporting his battle-qi, he now felt more confident in this battle.

"Attack!" The red-haired leader ordered.

The four warriors shot out four more rocks at nearly the same time, attacking the mounted magus simultaneously. Immediately following, the four warriors charged forward like arrows released from bows as they shot towards the Velocidragon.

## Chapter 10 - Dance of the Fire Serpents (part 1)

"ROAR!" The flames erupting from the Velocidragon's mouth encompassed a diameter of tens of meters of the surrounding area, bathing them in a sea of fire.

"Hiss....."

The Velocidragon's fire danced around the bodies of the four warriors, but guarded by the Protective Icy Carapace and their own battle-qi, the four warriors definitely would be able to resist the heat.

As for the archer, by this point, she had already mounted the Griffin and taken to the skies, her bow nocked.

The Vampiric Iron Bull stood there like a iron wall, protecting the two female magi.

"Swish! Swish! Swish!"

Her eyes filled with a fierce cold gleam, and her hands as steady as a rock, the Griffin-mounted archer shot out three arrows in a row. The target – the mysterious magus on the back of the Velocidragon!

“Whoosh!” The Velocidragon’s whip-like tail shot out like lightning, moving even faster than the arrows. In the blink of an eye, it shattered the arrows released from the archer’s triple shot. Immediately afterwards, its tail swept back towards the four charging warriors. The howling sound generated from the tail shattering the air with its movement caused the expressions on the faces of the four warriors to change dramatically. They immediately tried to leap backwards, like agile monkeys.

But the draconic tail didn’t move in a purely straight pattern; it oscillated and curved strangely, with no fixed pattern.

“Crash!”

One of the four warriors didn’t manage to dodge in time, and was directly struck by the draconic tail on the waist. Both the Protective Icy Carapace and his own battle-qi were smashed into nothingness in the blink of an eye. With a slight flick, the tail curled around him and tightly wrapped him up.

“Luke!” (Lu’jia). The red-haired warrior by his side howled angrily, his eyes filled with pain.

“No!” Luke was also screaming in terror.

With but a flick, the draconic tail tossed Luke directly towards the Velocidragon’s mouth. The Velocidragon opened its jaws, revealing its bloody maw, and chomped down. With a terrifying crunching sound, the last thing escaping Luke’s throat was an anguished scream.

Ground beneath the Velocidragon’s saw-like teeth, Luke’s entire body was turned into mincemeat. Half of one bloody leg escaped the Velocidragon’s mouth and fell down to the ground. Gleaming white bone could be seen protruding from the bloody half-leg.

“Don’t look.” Hillman covered Linley’s eyes.

That sudden display was simply too bloody. Even a fully grown adult, when faced with such a terrifying scene for the first time, would be panicked. Linley was just an eight year old child.

But it was too late. Linley had already seen everything.

"Huff. Huff." Linley felt as though his heart was being compressed by a giant boulder. His breathing was growing labored, and he started to pant. But in his mind's eye, he replayed the sight of the young man named Luke being eaten, over and over again.

His belly was ripped open, and his intestines had been shattered. His skull had been crushed, and half his leg had dropped to the ground!

All of these things made it hard for Linley to breathe, and he felt dizzy.

This was the first time Linley had seen a fight become so vicious and cruel. It was also the first time Linley had seen someone being eaten alive by a huge Velocidragon. The half-eaten leg, in particular, deeply buried itself in Linley's mind.

Hillman, Roger, and Lorry exchanged troubled glances as they watched Linley.

What sort of harm to the psyche would this bloody affair cause an eight year old child? Would it serve as a constant psychological trauma? Once a youth becomes traumatized by battle, his future accomplishments would be dramatically impacted.

"Killing someone. No big deal. No big deal." Linley forced himself to think these words repeatedly. "When I grow up and join the army, I too will have to kill people. Gotta hold on. Gotta hold on."

Linley really was intelligent. He had read many books, and knew what path he had embarked on for the future.

On the Yulan continent, when a man grew up, it would be very likely that he would experience life-and-death struggles. But since Linley was just a child who had not done so yet, he had to repeatedly tell himself to calm down. And slowly, the terror and horror in his heart really did begin to lessen.

In fact, much the opposite; in just a short period of time, Linley felt as though his blood was beginning to surge.

"That battle really is incredibly fierce. It really is exciting." For some reason, that bloody battle just then made Linley's blood boil with excitement, filling his heart with desire – a desire to battle and kill!

"Is it because of the Dragonblood in my veins?" Linley didn't know.

But Linley suddenly discovered that he was actually very eager to participate in these bloody struggles. Linley immediately stepped to the side, bypassing Hillman's

protective arm, and continued to watch the battle which was still going on a hundred meters away.

"Linley, don't watch." Hillman saw that Linley was intending to continue watching, and was shocked.

"Uncle Hillman, I'm not afraid." Linley turned his head to glance at Hillman.

Hillman suddenly noticed a red gleam of excitement in Linley's pupils. Surprised, he no longer tried to prevent Linley from watching. As Linley continued to watch the battle from afar, he saw that it was reaching an even bloodier climax.

"ROAR!" With a howl, the Velocidragon turned its head and bit down towards a warrior, while its huge claws swept towards another one. Its lightning-fast, whip-like tail, as well, struck out, aiming at the third warrior.

The warriors were pressed to the point of abandoning their assaults and instead retreating.

The mysterious magus on the back of the Velocidragon still hadn't moved. He let the Velocidragon deal with the threats as his lips continued to mumble.

"Dance of the Fire Serpents!"

The cold voice of the mysterious magus suddenly rang out, and in the blink of an eye, seven enormous fire serpents, each spanning tens of meters long, appeared. Howling, they erupted away from the magus in all directions. Each fire snake appeared to be a real, living creature, with distinct scales and enormous bodies that inspired fear in all who saw it.

Everyone who was watching was stunned.

A Fire Element spell of the eighth rank – Dance of the Fire Serpent!

It now became clear that this entire time, the mysterious magus was mumbling the words to a magical incantation. He was preparing this terrifying Fire Element spell of the eighth rank – Dance of the Fire Serpent! This spell could unleash seven enormous fire serpents, each of which had a simply astonishing attack power. Even the terrifying defensive ability of the Velocidragon would not be proof against it; if struck, even if it survived, it would be badly injured.

If dealing with a magus of the seventh rank, the small squad might be able to hold on for a while longer, but dealing with a magus of the eighth rank, and a Velocidragon as well? They simply did not have the power to resist.

Only now did they understand that this mysterious magus was a master of the eighth rank!

"It's the Dance of the Fire Serpents. Quick, run away!" The red-haired warrior's facial expression changed dramatically, and he shouted in a loud voice.

The six remaining members of the small squad were now all filled with terror.

"Too late. Prepare for the baptism of death!" The mysterious magus said in a cold, cruel voice, which pierced like a cold dagger at the hearts of the members of the small squad.

## **Chapter 11- Dance of the Fire Serpents (part 2)**

The seven fire serpents flew at a very high speed, and wherever they passed through, the stone houses nearby immediately began to blaze. The burning flames towered towards the high heavens, an absolutely catastrophic scene. Seeing their homes be disintegrated from afar, the denizens of Wushan township, who had long since fled and hidden far away, all felt pain and sorrow in their hearts.

In front of the seven giant fire serpents, their stone houses seemed like naught but toys. They were easily demolished, and the flames in the wreckages rose towards the sky.

"Run!" The female archer no longer cared about anything else. She immediately directed her griffin to fly to a higher altitude.

There was a limit to the distance at which a fire-element magus would be able to control the seven fire serpents. If the archer and her mount could fly beyond that point, she would be safe.

"Whooooosh." Two of the blazing fire serpents enveloped the two female magi and the Vampiric Iron Bull as well. Almost instantaneously, the sound of burning, crackling flesh could be heard, and Linley thought that he could smell hair burning.

"Big brother Kerry [Kai'lai]! Save us!" The desolate cry of a female magus sounded out, filled with pain, from within the middle of the fire serpent.

"Snort. Snort." The eyes of the Vampiric Iron Bull were terrifyingly red, and every single muscle in its body was quivering nonstop. It continuously roared in anger, wanting to charge past through the encircling fire serpents, but unfortunately, the restrictive power of each fire serpent was simply too great.

"Louisa [Lu'yi'sha]!" The red-haired warrior howled angrily, his voice filled with anguish.

Very shortly afterwards, both female magi and the Vampiric Iron Bull were reduced to naught but gray ash. But the red-haired warrior no longer had even the opportunity to cry out. He and the other two warriors each had to face an enormous fire serpent of their own as well. In front of the titanic flaming body of the serpents, they seemed to be nothing more than children, incapable of the slightest resistance.

They had the power to split stone with a single punch, but so what? While constricted by a huge flaming serpent, what could they do?

"Ahhhh!" Surrounded by flaming serpents, the three warriors couldn't help but let out torturous cries.

As they shouted, their battle-qi vanished, having been demolished. The hissing sound of burning flesh once again could be heard. The muscles on the faces of the three warriors twitched, and their eyes bulged out. All the hair on their bodies was burnt clean in the twinkling of an eye, and following that their skin, their flesh, and their bones. Nothing could withstand the terrifyingly high temperature of the fire serpents.

In a very short period of time, the three formidable warriors had also been reduced to nothing more than dust.

"Huff...huff..."

The female archer's breath was ragged, but she had finally escaped the boundaries of the Dance of the Fire Serpents.

"Luke...Louisa...big brother Kerry...I will definitely avenge you all. Definitely." The female archer cried bitterly, and as she did, she directed her griffin to fly still higher."

"ZZZT!"

An enormously thick bolt of lightning struck down from the clear, cloudless skies, striking directly down on the totally unprepared archer. Her entire body was turned directly to dust from that strike, while her griffin was scorched black as well. The two of them fell down from the sky, heavily crashing into the stone ground of the town as they crashed through a wooden roof and into the base of a dwelling.

"Want to run? Hmph." The mysterious magus let out a deep snort.

Over a hundred meters away, Hillman swallowed hard, his own heart filled with a thread of inescapable fear. "Not only is he a magus of the eighth rank...he is a dual element magus!"

....

"That spell was called Dance of the Fire Serpents?" Linley was still standing there, totally awestruck.

The sight of those enormous fire serpents and the inferno they had cast had totally shocked Linley, like he had never been shocked before. Each of the fire serpents was as terrifying as the Velocidragon. Seven of them together? They represented an utter apocalypse. Even the stone houses were disintegrated by their flames.

In the blink of an eye, those four mighty warriors, those two magi, and that archer, as well as their two magical beast companions were utterly destroyed, with the possible exception of that griffin.

The seven fire serpents had disappeared by now, but Linley could still feel the terrifying, seismic presence and power emanating from the area. The entire battlefield had been annihilated, leaving nothing left but the finest of debris. The debris all radiated tremendous heat, as though testifying to the power of the battle they had just endured.

"Ama...amazing."

Linley's breathing slowly began to stabilize. Swimming in his mind were images of those seven fire serpents, and how they had descended on the battlefield like a catastrophe of power.

Compared to that vision, even the Velocidragon was not as impressive as before.

Linley's gaze suddenly turned towards the mysterious magus on the back of the Velocidragon. By appearances, the magus was much smaller and much weaker.

"Just then...just then, was he the one who cast the 'Dance of the Fire Serpents'?" Linley really found it a little hard to believe. A person who seemed a full size smaller than Uncle Hillman was actually able to cast such an apocalyptic spell.

Linley's heart was suddenly filled with dread, as he stared at that far-off, distant figure.

"This...this is what a magus is?" For the first time, the concept of a magus clearly imprinted itself in Linley's mind.

At the same time...

Linley suddenly had a powerful urge to become a powerful magus as well.

"If one day, I too was capable of such a powerful attack..." Fantasizing about it, Linley felt the blood in his veins boil to the limit. He was in a state of tremendous excitement.

Right at that moment?

Linley knew the path that he would take in the future.

To pursue the peak, the pinnacle of power.

"Father!" Linley suddenly saw that his own father, Hogg. Seeing how Wushan township had just suffered an unmitigated catastrophe, as the lord of Wushan township, Hogg's heart was filled with helplessness.

"Don't make a sound." Hogg glanced at Linley, conveying that message with his eyes.

Hogg turned towards the magus, his heart filled with ruefulness. "He's actually a magus of the eighth rank. And a dual-element magus! Perhaps the entire kingdom of Fenlai has only a handful of people more powerful than him. Someone like him actually came to our little town..."

Hogg's only desire, at this point, was that the mysterious magus would leave as soon as possible, and let Wushan town return to its normal tranquility.

The mysterious magus suddenly leapt down directly from the back of the Velocidragon. He was at least two stories up, but he descended easily with a single jump.

Striding up to the ashes of the red-haired warrior, the mysterious magus waved his hands, and the gray ash parted. A violet, almost translucent-looking diamond suddenly appeared. With a flick of the wrist, the mysterious magus plucked out the d'Bero Shadow Diamond.

"Haha, the d'Bero shadow diamond. I searched for you for ten years. Who would have thought that just because today, I decided to pass by this town, I would actually meet you by accident? Haha...Heymans [Hai'man'si], now that I have this shadow diamond, once I socket it into my staff, I want to see how you will possibly stand against me next time. Haha..." The mysterious magus began to laugh wildly.

Hogg and the other residents of Wushan township simply watched quietly from afar, not daring to make a sound, for fear of angering this powerful, mysterious magus.

"Wushan town, eh...who leads Wushan town?" The mysterious magus suddenly said.

"Father..." Linley was shocked.

At this point, Hogg had no choice but to stiffen his spine and step forward. He respectfully said, "Mighty lord magus, I am the leader of Wushan town."

"Oh." The mysterious magus' face was still covered by his violet robes, preventing anyone from seeing his face. He lightly said, "Your town suffered some serious damages today. I annihilated this small adventuring party. On their bodies, there is sure to be a good amount of gold coins. The gold coins, no doubt, have been melted and reforged by my 'Dance of the Fire Serpents', but they are still worth some money. Just consider them yours, as my recompense for what Wushan town just went through."

Hearing the words of the mysterious magus, Hogg felt a sense of relief.

This mysterious magus probably wouldn't go kill-crazy now.

"I, Hogg, on behalf of the entire Wushan township, would like to thank you for your kindness, lord magus." Hogg respectfully bowed down.

The mysterious magus lightly nodded, then turned and walked towards the Velocidragon. The Velocidragon immediately knelt down, stretching out his foreleg. The magus stepped onto the Velocidragon's leg, walked two steps, then easily jumped onto the Velocidragon's back.

"Hmph." The Velocidragon let out a lazy snort, as two plumes of white smoke once more emanated from its nostrils.

And then, the Velocidragon once more began walking, its heavy footsteps shaking the earth. Watching the enormous creature and the mysterious magus on its back walk far away and disappear off into the distance, all the citizens of Wushan township finally felt their hearts begin to calm down.

## Chapter 12 – The Will of the Mighty (part 1)

Only after seeing the magical beast of the seventh rank, the Velocidragon, and its mysterious magus master depart, did Hogg calm down.

“Uncle Hiri.” Hogg immediately turned to look at his housetaker Hiri. “Immediately order some people to recover all of the melted gold from within those piles of ashes. This adventuring party was quite extraordinary as well. No doubt, they had a great deal of wealth on them. I hope they had enough to recompense the losses we have suffered today”

Hogg stared in all directions, seeing how so many houses had been reduced to rubble.

“Yes, milord.” Hiri nodded.

“Hillman.” Hogg turned to look at Hillman. Smiling, he said, “What do you think?”

Hillman nodded as well. “I was absolutely terrified. When I saw that magical beast of the seventh rank, the Velocidragon, and that mysterious magus, I knew that Wushan township didn’t have the slightest ability to fight back in any way. If such an exalted personage as a magus of the eighth rank decided to destroy our town on a whim, I doubt anyone would dare to criticize him, much less sanction or punish him.”

Magi had extremely high social standings.

Normally, even an ordinary magus had the same social standing as a noble.

And a magus of the eighth rank? Even if he was in the presence of a king, he would not need to kneel or show obeisance. He could just chat while staying standing. From this, one could tell how exalted a level an eighth rank magus held.

“Right. So, we should all celebrate the fact that not a single person from Wushan town perished today.” Hogg laughed.

“It definitely is worth celebrating,” Hillman nodded and laughed as well.

“Hillman, take some men to assist Uncle Hiri. After finishing up, please address the issue of the commoners who lost their houses.” Hogg instructed.

“Yes, lord Hogg.” Hillman assented.

Hogg looked behind him carefully, then asked Hillman suspiciously, "Hm? Where did Linley go? He was just here a moment ago."

"No idea. Didn't notice." Hillman shook his head as well.

"My lord, young master Linley has already went home." Hiri said from the side. "Although, when he left, he seemed to be in a daze. No clue what he was thinking about."

Hogg thoughtfully nodded.

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If there was one thing which the Baruch clan manor did not lack for, it was rooms. In the days of the Baruch clan's glories, hundreds of people lived here. The population now was much lower than before. Even an eight year old child such as Linley had his standalone quarters.

Within Linley's bedroom.

Linley was kneeling on the bed, his brow furrowed in thought.

Again and again, the terrifying power of the 'Dance of the Fire Serpents' swam about in his mind's eye. Those seven huge fire serpents and the tempest of flame they generated repeated in his mind over and over again, as well as how they instantly turned everything around them to ash, including the powerful warriors and magi of the small adventuring group.

"Magi are so powerful."

Linley felt a thread of desire in his heart. "Although I am a member of the Dragonblood Warriors clan, the density of Dragonblood in my veins is too low. The fact that anyone with Dragonblood is totally unable to utilize any other battle-qì cultivating methods is something which will hold back my ability to develop my warrior abilities to the maximum. I wonder if it would be possible for me to be a magus, instead."

Linley suddenly had the desire to become a magus.

"That Velocidragon was terrifyingly powerful as well. If I were to have a Velocidragon, then..."

Linley began to think back to the awe-inspiring might of the Velocidragon.

It's lightning-fast, whip-like tail had so easily shattered the stone projectiles aimed at it, and had demolished any houses it touched. Its enormous body resembled huge siege weapons which armies might field in a war. Once it charged forward at a fast pace, considering how tough its scales were, the Velocidragon really would be a terrifying opponent.

"Magical beasts...I wonder how someone acquires a magical beast." Linley desired to have a magical beast of his own as well.

For whatever reason, as he lay on the bed, Linley simply couldn't fall asleep. He tossed and turned, his mind filled with images of the Velocidragon and the 'Dance of the Fire Serpents' which the magus had displayed.

"Linley, what's wrong?" A familiar voice said.

Linley scrambled to his feet. Raising his head, he saw that it was his father, Hogg. At the moment, a smiling, praising look was on Hogg's face as he watched Linley.

"Father." Linley said respectfully. Suddenly, Linley felt confused. "Why is father smiling at me? And with this sort of expression?"

Hogg was extremely strict with Linley, and rarely smiled at him in such a intimate manner. His current expression made Linley feel all the more astonished.

"Not bad, not bad," Hogg said proudly as he looked at Linley. "You really are a scion of our Dragonblood Warrior clan. You have our superior qualities. If a descendant of the Dragonblood Warriors were to be terrified of death, terrified of blood, of slaughter, then it would be an absolute joke."

Upon hearing these words, Linley immediately understood. His father was happy at how he had not been terrified by the sight of the Velocidragon eating Luke alive.

Linley said, surprised, "Father, you saw everything?"

"That Velocidragon caused such a stir. How could I not? As soon as the Velocidragon arrived at Wushan township, I came out as well, but I was off to a different side. I could clearly see the expressions on your face and on Hillman's," Hogg nodded.

Linley grinned.

Back then, aside from the initial bit of panic, he later only felt his blood boil and surge, filling him with a thirst for bloodletting. Linley, as well, had wondered at the time if it was because of the Dragonblood in his veins.

Hogg laughed. "Linley, did the events of today astonish you so much that you even forgot about dinner?"

"Dinner?" Linley was startled.

"Rumble." Linley's belly sounded in agreement at this time. Only now did Linley realize that the evening training hadn't even begun before the Velocidragon and the mysterious magus arrived.

By all rights, it was now time for dinner.

But Linley's mind was still preoccupied thinking about that 'Dance of the Fire Serpents' and that Velocidragon.

"Father, I'd like to ask, is it possible for a member of the Dragonblood Warrior clan to become a magus?" Linley's hands unconsciously balled up, clenching his bedsheets. He stared hard at his father.

Hogg was startled, but in the next moment he immediately understood. Looks like his child now wanted to become a magus.

"It is possible." Hogg nodded.

Linley couldn't prevent a look of joy from appearing on his face.

Hogg waved his hand, motioning for Linley to calm down, before saying, "Linley, there have been magi in the lineage of our Dragonblood Warrior clan. However, there's only been two in total. Linley, you should know that the most important thing for a magus is 'natural talent'. Normally, only one person in ten thousand has the talent to become a magus. One in ten thousand! The chance really is very low. So, you'd best not have too much hope."

Linley shook his head.

"Father, so long as there is any hope, I will persevere." A solemn look was on Linley's face.

Hogg looked at the serious expression on his eight year old boy's face. By all rights, a young child being so serious was an amusing thing. But Hogg did not laugh.

Hogg considered for a while, then said, "Linley, every year, when the army recruitment drive begins in deep autumn, in the royal capital of Fenlai City, there is a magus student recruitment testing drive. If you really wish to go, when autumn comes around, you can go take the test."

"Late autumn? Isn't that just half a year away?" Linley's eyes were filled with excitement.

## Chapter 13- The Will of the Mighty (part 2)

At dinnertime, the three members of the Baruch clan and their housekeeper, Hiri, all shared dinner together. Little Wharton raised a cute ruckus at the dinner table, filling it with laughter. By the time dinner came to an end, the old housekeeper carried Wharton back to his room, while Linley and his father, Hogg, began to chat.

"Right. Father, which one is stronger? A magus, or a warrior?" Linley was curious.

Hogg glanced at Linley. Chuckling, he shook his head and said, "Linley, magi and warriors each have their own strengths. At the same rank, a magus is perhaps slightly stronger than a warrior. But the most important thing is that the status of a magus is a full rank higher than that of an equivalent warrior. For example, that dual-element magus of the eighth rank, in terms of social standing, is perhaps slightly superior to even a warrior of the ninth rank."

"If they are only slightly more powerful, why is there such a big discrepancy in status?" Linley was curious.

Hogg laughed. "Before discussing this, first you should understand the ranking system of the magi. There are nine ranks. First rank and second rank magi are considered junior magi. Third and fourth rank magi are considered mid-level magi. Fifth and sixth rank magi are considered senior magi. The three ranks above them; seventh, eighth and ninth? These are all terrifyingly powerful people. And of course, above the magi of the ninth rank are the Saint-level magi!"

"The reason why magi have such social standings is because the destructive potential their spells have is enormous." Hogg picked up a glass of juice and continued talking while sipping at it.

"Destructive potential?" Linley looked at his father.

Putting down the glass of juice, Hogg nodded. "A single warrior, even a Dragonblood Warrior, can at most kill a hundred people with the swipe of a sword. When faced with a million man army, at best he could kill their leader, but when a leader dies, he can simply be replaced. But a Saint-level magus? If he chooses to utilize one of those powerful forbidden spells, he can annihilate an entire town or wipe out an army of hundreds of thousands. With an entire army destroyed, even if

its leader survived, what's the use? Thus, to a kingdom, a Saint-level magus is more terrifying than an entire enemy army."

Linley immediately understood.

"Let's not discuss Saint-level magi for now. Even a magus of the eighth or ninth rank would be capable of using spells which contain shocking power and are able to change the course of a battle. This is why magi have such a high social standing." Hogg said with a light chuckle.

Linley quietly nodded.

In the war-torn land of the Yulan continent, one could imagine how important the magi were to a kingdom.

"Oh, right. Father, I read in one of the books that compared to a warrior, a magi's physical strength is much weaker. But just then, I watched that magus jump down from the back of the Velocidragon with ease. How could his body be physically weak?" Linley pursued.

Hogg replied, "Let's discuss this question later. Linley, you should know that in the Yulan continent, an average person's lifespan is around 120-130 years. Powerful magi and warriors can live for longer, usually up to two or three hundred years, or sometimes even four hundred years. The absolute limit to a person's lifespan is five hundred years. Only those who have attained the legendary power of Saint-level combatants can live eternally, unbound by the dictates of time."

Linley nodded.

He had read of this in his books as well.

"But Linley, do you know the reason why powerful warriors and magi enjoy such a long life-span?" Hogg followed with a question.

Linley was startled.

Linley had always considered it to be a fact of life that powerful warriors and magi could live for three or four hundred years. He had never considered the reason.

Looking at the expression on Linley's face, Hogg couldn't help but laugh. "Linley, first of all, I must tell you that in this world, there are elemental powers. Fire-type element, water-type element, wind-type element, earth-type element, lightning-type element, light-type element, and darkness-type element. Warriors and magi both rely on absorbing these elements from nature as part of their training. Both magic

spells and battle-qi are fueled by and determined by a specific elemental type. If you had carefully observed, you would have been able to notice that in the adventuring party you saw earlier today, for the four warriors, the red-headed leader had fire-type battle-qi. The other three had either wind-type battle-qi, or water-type battle-qi. And just like battle-qi, the spells of magi also have elemental types!"

This was the first time that Linley had ever heard about this. Only now did he learn that both magi and warriors relied on absorbing natural energy from the elements.

"The reason why powerful magi can live so long is because when magi absorb natural elemental energy into their body to generate pure mageforce, when the elemental energy flows through their body, it will naturally refine their apertures, their joints, and their flesh, making their bodies stronger and stronger. With a stronger body, naturally they will live longer. By the same logic, when warriors cultivate their battle-qi, they also absorb natural energy, which flows through their body and strengthens it. The more powerful a warrior his, the stronger his body will be. Naturally, he will live a long life." Hogg explained everything in detail.

Linley felt as though only now did everything become crystal clear.

Based on his father's words, the bodies of magi had also been strengthened by elemental power and would therefore naturally be very strong.

"But father, why is it that people say magi have weak bodies?" Linley was confused.

Hogg shook his head. "Can't you think this through yourself? Magi only have weak bodies in comparison to warriors of the same rank, and not in absolute terms. For example, a magi of the eighth rank might have the same physical strength of a warrior of the second or third rank, even if he never engaged in any physical training. But of course, compared to a warrior of the eighth rank, his body would be very weak indeed!"

Linley slapped himself on the head, then laughed, somewhat embarrassed.

How could he not have realized this simple logic? His thoughts really had been too rigid.

"Although, despite the fact that magi are vulnerable in melee combat, they do have their own ways to address this deficiency. One method is utilizing magical protective spells, such as the 'shield of earth', 'shield of ice', 'shield of wind', or 'shield of light' spells. First, they would use their magic to defend; then, they would use their magic to strike back!"

"And truly powerful magi have another method. Using 'magical beasts'!"

Hearing these words, Linley's eyes shone.

Linley wanted a magical beast of his own as well, such as a powerful Velocidragon.

"A powerful magical beast can protect the body of his magus, preventing enemies from getting close. This way, the magus can immediately cast his attacking spells to kill his opponents." Hogg smiled as he spoke.

Linley immediately asked, "Father, how can a person acquire a magical beast companion?"

Seeing the expression on Linley's face, Hogg couldn't help but laugh. "There's only two ways to acquire a magical beast companion. The first is to make the magical beast willingly subordinate himself to you and serve you. The second way is to use a soul-binding magical array to enslave the magical beast."

"The requirements for the former are very difficult. For a magical beast to willingly subordinate himself to you, perhaps the only way is to defeat the magical beast in direct combat. Only then would he willingly follow you. For example, if you wanted to subdue a Velocidragon, you would first have to be able to defeat that Velocidragon in battle." His father's words rendered Linley speechless.

He wanted a Velocidragon of his own, but how could he possibly have the power to defeat one?

"As for the second method, it is extremely complicated to set up a soul-binding magical array. Only a magus of the seventh rank, at the very least, could set up such an array." Hogg said in a composed voice.

Linley was stunned. "Father, by what you say...only a magus of the seventh rank or higher can enslave a magical beast?"

"No, not necessarily. If you have enough money, you can purchase a soul-binding scroll. When the time comes, all you have to do is to tear it apart, and it will automatically generate a soul-binding magical array. However, a soul-binding scroll is amazingly expensive," Hogg said with a self-deprecating laugh.

"How expensive is it?" Linley pursued the topic.

"Last I heard, the going price was around ten thousand gold coins. And what's more is, even if you had the money, there's almost no market for it due to its rarity." Hogg's words forced Linley to laugh bitterly at himself.

The hardest part to acquiring a magical beast companion was in defeating it.

Of course, you could always acquire a weak magical beast as a companion, but what would be the point? But for a powerful magical beast, do you have enough power of your own to subdue it? If you were to defeat it using traps and trickery, how could the magical beast possibly be willing to serve?"

It isn't an easy thing to convince someone to whole-heartedly subordinate themself to you.

As for the second method of using a soul-binding array, it was clear that this option was only available to powerful magi or to wealthy people. Not even many noble clans would be willing to part with the extravagant sum of ten thousand coins for a single soul-binding scroll.

Chewing on his lips, Linley furrowed his brows in thought.

"If I really want to acquire a magical beast companion, based on my family's economic situation, I would have to become a magus of the seventh rank first. That's the only way." Linley secretly pondered all the possibilities, but he knew very well how difficult this would be.

And the first barrier to this plan? The question of whether or not he even had the natural talent to use magic!

After all, he only had a ten-thousand in one chance. If he didn't have the natural talent for it, then there was no way he could become a magus.

## Chapter 14 – The Battle in the Sky (part 1)

Dawn the next day.

Just like every other day, the empty ground east of Wushan township was filled with youths. Hillman and the other two teachers had not yet arrived, and so all the children were noisily and energetically chatting together. Naturally, the topic of their conversation was yesterday's shocking battle.

"That magical beast yesterday was so powerful. When Uncle Hillman and the others were standing up in front, I was behind them, sneaking peeks from afar. You guys have no idea. When that huge magical beast simply scraped its claws against the ground, the stone road was shattered into countless pieces. And those houses collapsed like they were made of mud." In the midst of all the children, Hadley, ever the most talkative of them, was narrating glibly and wildly, waving and gesticulating as though he had seen everything with his own eyes.

All the children were staring at Hadley with wide eyes.

"Hadley, yesterday you were with us on the east side as well. You didn't dare go over. How could you see all this?" A thirteen year old brown-haired child snorted.

These slightly older children weren't as easy to cozen as those seven and eight year old kids.

Hadley turned to stare at the thirteen year old youth. His eyes widening, he said, "Faura [Fu'la], you don't believe me? When have I, Hadley, ever tricked anyone?"

That brown-haired child named Faura said with a sneer, "Everyone knows what a big talker you are. When do you ever speak the truth? Hey everyone, why don't you guys speak for yourselves; has Hadley ever told the truth?" Faura said to the children next to him.

Those twelve to fifteen year old children all began to laugh. "Right on. This little scamp Hadley is always filled with nonsense."

A number of slightly older children stood on Faura's side.

Hadley immediately said urgently, "You guys don't believe me? Fine, don't believe me!" Furious, Hadley turned around, searching everywhere until he found Linley. His eyes brightening, he immediately said, "But everyone here knows that aside from Uncle Hillman and the other two, Linley also went. Linley saw everything with his own eyes. Linley's words should be true, right? Let Linley tell you if I spoke the truth or not."

"Young master Linley?" The youths turned to look at Linley.

In the eyes of the children of Wushan township, Linley had some stature amongst them. First of all, he was the heir to the Baruch clan, and secondly, as an eight year old child, Linley could match the thirteen and fourteen year olds in training. In the wartorn land of the Yulan continent, Linley's prowess caused all of the children of Wushan township to admire him.

"Young master Linley saw everything with his own eyes. Naturally, we would believe whatever young master Linley says." Those youths nodded.

Those thirteen and fourteen year olds were more mature as well. They knew that Linley was a noble and not like them. Almost all of them addressed him as 'young master Linley'. Only Hadley and the rest of the rascally seven and eight year olds still continued to directly address him as 'Linley', without regard for propriety.

"Tell'm, Linley! Was I lying? Tell'm what happened!" Hadley rushed towards Linley, tugging Linley's hand and secretly winking towards Linley.

Linley couldn't help but feel helpless. How was it that Hadley's nonsense roped him into this conversation as well?

"That magical beast is known as a 'Velocidragon', and is a magical beast of seventh rank. It is incredibly powerful. Its entire body is covered in extremely hard scales, impenetrable to normal weapons. It is also armed with a sturdy, whip-like tail and with sharp claws. Those tough road stones and floor foundation stones were ripped apart like paper by its tail and claws. It was even able to breath fire from its mouth, fire so hot that even the stones cracked apart." Linley said truthfully.

All of the children listened quietly to Linley.

"Actually, all of you knew how powerful the Velocidragon was from the moment you saw it. No need for me to elaborate." Linley said with a smile.

All of the older children nodded.

As soon as they saw the Velocidragon the previous day, they had been scared stiff. Its huge body had seemed as massive as a mountain cliff, and those huge red scales on its body left nothing to the imagination with regards to how tough they must be.

"You hear that? I told you, that Velocidragon creature is really powerful!" Hadley began shouting loudly.

That youth named Faura glanced at him, and was about to say something.

"Uncle Hillman is coming." Linley saw Hillman, Lorry, and Roger walking towards them from afar, and immediately spoke up. Immediately, all of the children calmed down and in a very orderly fashion, lined up into three groups.

The empty training field immediately settled down. Only the footsteps of Hillman and the other two could be heard.

Hillman and the other two walked to the front of the three groups, facing the children. Hillman smiled and directly addressed what was on everyone's mind.  
"Everyone should know about what happened yesterday, right?"

"We do." Hearing Hillman's words and seeing how relaxed Hillman was, all of the children immediately replied vigorously.

"Great." Hillman's facial expression suddenly turned serious. "That huge creature is known as a Velocidragon. The magus on top of the Velocidragon is incredibly powerful. But everyone should know one thing!"

Hillman's gaze immediately sharpened as it swept across the faces of each child. "Even that mysterious magus gained his power one step at a time, starting from the bottom ranks. In order to subdue that powerful Velocidragon, he had to spend many years of toil and hard work! If you guys want to subdue a Velocidragon of your own, to be as powerful as that mysterious magus, then all of you have to work hard without fail!"

"Every single person has the potential to become mighty. The only question is, are you willing to work hard enough at it?"

Uncle Hillman's words were as clear and as hard as nails. His gaze was fierce and cold.

Immediately, all the children quieted down, but all of them still had their own imaginations running wild, and their gazes shone with their different thoughts.

"Now, time to do our morning exercises. Same as always – face the sun, and begin the 'qi-absorbing exercise'." Hillman crisply began the day's program, and immediately the three groups of children began to practice the 'qi-absorbing stance'.

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Based on each squad's ability, Hillman assigned different exercises. Under the guidance of the three adults, each child studiously completed each exercise. Today, the training atmosphere was totally different. Almost none of the children complained of being tired.

Every single one of them had some fire in their belly today, and they trained hard!

"...fifty...fifty one..." Linley counted mentally as he laid horizontal to the ground, supporting himself with just the fingertips of one hand and the tips of his toes. His entire body was tense. He was in the middle of training through five-finger pushups.

This exercise could not only train his palm strength, it could also improve his finger strength and his elbow strength. This method was simple and effective.

If someone wanted to be a mighty warrior, normally they would have to practice cultivating battle-qi. The ability to cultivate battle-qi, in turn, was determined by how strong and sturdy one's body was, as a stronger body would be able to enjoy a more powerful battle-qi.

"Since my body has Dragonblood in its veins and is unable to practice battle-qi, my only option is to far outstrip everyone else in bodily strength." Linley's eyes were firm, and his fingers jutted into the ground, as tough and unyielding as old roots. He did one pushup after another, amazing many of the already-exhausted youths around him.

"Ninety eight, ninety nine..."

Linley continued to persevere.

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"Morning exercises are over." Hillman said in a loud voice, facing the children.

After saying these words, Hillman took a deep breath as he thought to himself, "What story should I tell them today?" Every day, when morning exercises were completed, Hillman would tell the children stories. This had turned into a routine."

"Uncle Hillman, we-"

A child's voice rang out.

But just at that moment, halfway through the child's words, Hillman, who had been looking slightly downwards as he collected his thoughts, suddenly felt a strange feeling. He lifted his head up. Right now, all three groups of children were all staring east, eyes wide and jaws dropped. Roger and Lorry had also turned to stare east, and their gazes were also filled with awe.

"Eh?" Surprised, Hillman couldn't help but turn around as well and stare to the east.

In the east, not too far away, perhaps two or three hundred meters in the air, an enormous, ebony-colored dragon lay coiled in the sky, its body at least a hundred meters long. The enormous black dragon's giant eyes were the size of cartwheels. Its sparkling black scales were huge enough to fill any man's heart with dread. And its hundred-meter long wings were gently flapping, but with movement contained incredible power.

Magical beast – Black Dragon!

## Chapter 15- The Battle in the Sky (part 2)

Black Dragons were ranked amongst the most powerful magical beasts in the world. The Black Dragon race were generally at least magical beasts of the ninth ranks. Powerful members of this race could even reach the stage of being Saint-level combatants. But regardless of whether a Black Dragon was of the ninth rank or Saint-level, it would indubitably be incomparably more powerful than the Velocidragon.

At present, the group of children and the three instructors were about several hundred meters away from the Black Dragon. To see a hundred-meter long Black Dragon from such a close distance is an awe-inspiring experience which simply can't be explained with words.

The most terrifying thing of all?

On top of the head of the Black Dragon, a gray-robed man stood, arrogant in demeanor. The wind howled about him, but although the man's gray robes fluttered a bit, he himself maintained a ramrod straight posture, as though he were a carved sculpture. His gaze was focused on a middle-aged, green-robed man who hovered in the middle of the air in front of him. The green-robed man wore a sword behind his back.

The gray-robed man mounted on the Black Dragon and the sword-bearing green-robed man were staring at each other.

Hovering in the sky!

Aside from wind-type magi who were able to use the seventh-ranked spell, 'Soaring Technique', only Saint-level combatants were able to stand and hover in the sky. The sword this green-robed middle-aged man bore on his back gave testament to his true status.

Warrior. A Saint-level warrior.

"A man in gray who was able to subdue a Black Dragon? And a Saint-level combatant who can fly?" The eight year old Linley was totally stunned, even after having witnessed the previous day's amazing battle. Not only him; even Hillman, a warrior of the sixth rank, was totally flabbergasted.

"Saint-level combatants. Actual Saint-level combatants." Hillman was mumbling, his entire body trembling.

Hillman, being a man who had been tested in trials of blood and death, was the first to recover and clear his mind. But even after recovering, Hillman still felt as though he were in a dream. "Yesterday, a dual-element magus of the eighth rank came.

Today, something even more amazing; two Saint-level combatants, and a Black Dragon! In my entire life, I've never seen anything so amazing."

Hillman felt slightly dizzy.

Black Dragons were amongst the most powerful of magical beasts, at least ninth-rank in power. Someone who was able to subdue one was almost certainly a Saint-level combatant. And from the looks of it, the person facing off against him was also a Saint-level combatant.

This was ample proof that the gray-robed man was a Saint-level combatant as well.

Hillman and the others were hundreds of meters away from the Black Dragon. No matter how sharp their ears were, there was no way for them to hear the words being exchanged by the two parties.

Not knowing what was being said, they just watched, until suddenly...

"Roaaaaaaaaaaar."

Suddenly, the enormous Black Dragon let out a furious roar as its two huge wings began to flap vigorously. It emanated a terrifying pressure, causing everyone, Hillman included, to feel their legs grow soft and to feel as though they couldn't breathe.

"Is this dragonsfear?" Linley also felt as though his heart was being squeezed by a huge stone, making it impossible for him to breathe, but nonetheless, Linley felt extremely excited, and his blood was beginning to boil.

The Black Dragon was simply too powerful.

"Rudi [Lu'di]! Don't go overboard!" That green-robed man suddenly let out a powerful shout. The explosive sound of his words reverberated in the air as though it were thunder. Not only did Hillman hear these words clearly; every single person in Wushan township heard the words clearly.

Hillman paused. He mumbled the words, "Rudi? Rudi?"

But Hillman quickly realized what was going on. Rapidly turning around, he shouted fiercely at all the children, "Everyone, go home right now! Go home and hide! NOW!" Hillman's loud roar and his urgent expression stunned every child present.

Hillman's thought processes were very clear.

These two Saint-level combatants obviously were engaged in some sort of dispute. Apparently, they were about to come to blows.

When Saint-level combatants were about to engage in a fight, the children standing there watching the fight would not be able to protect whatsoever. The slightest side reverberations could kill all the children present. Saint-level combatants were reputed to have the power to shatter the heavens and obliterate the earth.

Even if that reputation was slightly exaggerated, they definitely did have the power to obliterate a city or a tall mountain.

“Quick, let’s move. Don’t stand there in a daze, move!” Hillman shouted loudly while shoving some children away.

Only now did the rest of the children awaken from their stupor. Although they didn’t understand why Hillman was pushing them to go back to their homes and wanted to continue watching the Saint-level combatants, Hillman’s awe-inspiring presence was still enough to send all of the children running speedily for their homes.

“Lorry, Roger, quick, take the six and seven year olds back home. Quickly! If Saint-level combatants clash, when the side-effects of their struggle reach us, the aftermath will be....”

Hillman’s face was filled with urgency.

“Understood, Captain!” Lorry and Roger totally understood what their captain was thinking.

Lorry and Roger immediately turned around and lifted up the children who were slow runners. They carried two in each arm and two on their backs as well. Hillman joined them as well, quickly beginning to pick up child after child.

“Linley, go home, quick!” Hillman, still carrying several children, shouted towards Linley, who was also running.

“I know, Uncle Hillman!” Linley replied loudly.

Although Linley was only eight years old, his running speed was on par with fourteen year olds. While running, Linley would often turn back to stare at the sky. That huge coiled Black Dragon and those two Saint-level combatants had fully captured his attention.

"Captain, Lord Hogg ordered us to come assist you!" Twelve warriors had come flying out of the Baruch clan manor. As soon as they saw Hillman, they shouted at him.

"Quick, take these children home!" Hillman immediately ordered.

"Yes, Captain!" The warriors hastily replied, and quickly began sending the six and seven year olds to their homes.

"All of you, go home! Go home and hide! Protect yourselves!" Hillman shouted again in a loud voice.

Hillman possessed a great deal of authority in Wushan township. Upon hearing his words, many of the villagers who had been terrified at the sight of a Black Dragon knew immediately what to do. Right now, the entire Wushan township had turned into a frenzy of activity. All of the children and all of the workers fled to their homes. At this point in time, the only thing which could protect them was the sturdy stone of their houses.

Linley directly charged into his own residence.

"Quick, hide in the cellar beneath the storage room." Hogg was standing in the middle of the courtyard. Upon seeing Linley, he immediately ordered him in. The cellar beneath the storage room was the largest, most sturdy cellar within the Baruch clan's manor. Anyone hiding there definitely would be able to survive.

"Yes, father!" Linley repeatedly nodded, and immediately ran in the direction of the storage room.

While running as fast as he could, Linley's mind returned to the Black Dragon, its gray-robed rider, and the green-robed man. He couldn't help but turn once again and look back at the eastern sky. Since all the buildings in the small town were fairly low in height, he could clearly see for hundreds of meters.

Right now, the Black Dragon was growling in a low voice nonstop.

"Dillon [Di'long], if you are going to be so stubborn about this, then don't blame me for my actions." A cold voice emanated from the sky. Immediately afterwards, the Black Dragon began to let out a series of angry roars and belching forth smoky black fire from its mouth.

"Rudi, today I'm going to see exactly how powerful of a Saint-level magus you are!" The green-robed man shouted angrily.

## Chapter 16 – Catastrophe (part 1)

Clearly, the swordsman wearing green was named Dillon, while the gray-robed man was named Rudi.

The Black Dragon beneath the gray-robed man breathed out a huge plume of black flame, surrounding the green-robed man and swirling like smoke. Suddenly, the green-robed swordsman's eyes shone with a fierce green light, and then his entire body was surrounded by a protective green aura, preventing the flames from injuring him in the slightest. At the same time, the ringing sound of a sword could be heard.

That ringing sound was even louder and more pure than the dragon's roar, encompassing the heavens and the earth.

The green-robed man struck out with his longsword, and suddenly, a huge, indistinct sword tip spanning tens of meters in length appeared and slashed outwards into the air, fiercely attacking the gray-robed man. The gray-robed man stared coldly at that sword of light. Not moving in the slightest, he just constantly mumbled magical incantations.

"Is this the tip of a sword? The tip of an enormous sword?" While running to the warehouse, Linley was still watching with his head turned. "How is that gray-robed man going to block? Using the Black Dragon?"

"Crash!"

The Black Dragon didn't block at all, and allowed the enormous sword-tip to come crashing down directly on the body of the gray-robed man. The man's gray robes immediately exploded in all directions, but after having done so, a suit of shining protective battle armor was revealed underneath it. The battle armor was so shiny, it was piercing to the eye, as though it were made of diamonds.

The sword-tip's collision with the battle-armor had actually done no harm at all to the gray-robed man.

"How is that possible?!" Linley was truly scared silly.

Since he wasn't watching where he was running, Linley suddenly stumbled on a stone and went crashing to the floor. But even on the floor, Linley was still continuing to watch that battle in the eastern sky. "What sort of armor is that? How could its defensive abilities be so strong?"

"Linley, hurry! Stop daydreaming!" Seeing Linley, Hogg couldn't help but let out a furious roar.

"Yes, father!" Linley was startled awake. He immediately clambered to his feet and began running in the direction of the warehouse again.

"Rumble, rumble..." Suddenly, a terrifying sound could be heard from the heavens, followed by a terrifying screech which shook the entire Wushan township. Linley couldn't help but once again turn his head towards the eastern sky to take a look. That single glance stunned him once again.

The eastern sky had suddenly become densely filled with giant flying boulders, every single one of them the size of a house.

"Swoosh, swoosh, swoosh!"

All of those house-sized boulders were covered with flashing light, the color of yellow dirt. They flew through the air at astonishing speeds as they struck like meteors towards the green-robed man. Every single stone had to be tens of millions of pounds in weight. Each one of these boulders were uncountably times heavier and larger than the stones used by catapults in times of war.

Even the walls of a city could not resist such a powerful boulder.

A single giant boulder carried such powerful force, but now, the entire sky was filled with them, as countless boulders were arcing towards the man in green. Every single person in Wushan township was stunned by the sight.

"Crash!"

As the first boulder struck the man in green, the amount of green light covering his body suddenly increased dramatically, transforming him into a green sun, emanating piercing rays of green light in all directions.

Countless boulders converged on the green man, like drops of water in a rainstorm.

In the blink of an eye, it seemed as though he had become completely surrounded by boulders. The green light could now only be seen through tiny 'cracks' in that wall of boulders.

"Shatter!"

With a thunderous cracking sound, one boulder after another began to explode, as the boulders began to be shattered into tiny pieces by that terrifyingly powerful

battle-qi. Each and every boulder, originally the size of a house, was shattered into much smaller pieces, and shot outwards in every direction.

They were hundreds of meters in the air to begin with. When shot out with the force of that battle-qi, the rubble shot out with tremendous power to an extremely far distance.

“Oh no.” Hogg’s face had turned white. Hillman, who was still on the streets of Wushan township, saw this and his face turned white as well. They all understood...

A catastrophe was descending upon Wushan township!

Countless rocks, ranging in size from two meters in diameter to man-sized, fell down in all directions, with no rhythm or pattern. Each boulder had produced tens, if not hundreds, of pieces, and perhaps twenty percent of them were shooting in the direction of Wushan township.

“Quick, go inside, quick!” Hogg was so agitated, he roared with fury.

At this moment, Linley was still tens of meters away from the warehouse. Hearing his father’s angry roar, Linley paid attention to nothing else and ran towards the warehouse at top speed. As he did, he could hear one ‘crash’, ‘crash’, ‘crash’ after another. The sound of countless stones raining on Wushan township had begun.

It was like an earthquake was occurring. A picture of absolute disaster.

“Whoosh!” A boulder that must’ve weighed hundreds of pounds shot right past Linley, coming to a crashing rest not too far away from his feet, creating a huge crater. Linley felt cold sweat pour down his back. Just a tiny bit of a difference in trajectory, and his little life would’ve been over.

“Crash!” “Crash!” “Crash!” “Crash!”

The sound of stones smashing apart houses could be heard. The sound of stones colliding with the ground, the sounds of stones shattering wood, the sounds of people howling in pain...all sorts of sounds mixed together unceasingly, forming the symphony of disaster.

“Swoosh!” Another huge rock slammed into the ground in front of Linley, forcing him to rapidly jump backwards.

But if he kept on having to dodge like this, how would he manage to hide within the warehouse?

"Young master Linley, hurry!" A man came charging out from within the warehouse. It was Uncle Hiri, the housekeeper. His body was currently covered with red battle-qi, and he ran directly towards Linley.

"Big brother, hurry!"

At the door to the warehouse, four-year old Wharton stood crying as he yelled towards Linley.

"Wharton, go inside now!" Linley roared back angrily.

"WHOOSH!" A huge rock nearly two meters in diameter came flying in their direction from far away, headed directly towards the warehouse. Linley immediately realized that when this giant boulder smashed into the warehouse, Wharton would either suffer serious injury, or even die!

"Quick, Wharton, inside!" Linley's eyes were opened so wide as to appear bloodshot, and he howled angrily as he ran towards the warehouse at top speed.

He no longer paid any attention to the raining stones, nor did he try to avoid them. He ran directly towards the warehouse in a straight line.

Hiri was facing Linley, and simply couldn't see the giant boulder headed towards the warehouse. But Linley saw everything clearly. When the boulder descended and shattered the room, how could little Wharton survive?

"Young master Linley?" Seeing how Linley was acting, Hiri couldn't help but feel shocked.

Three more boulders came crashing down near Linley, but moving like a panther, Linley continued to charge forwards, his gaze fixed on little Wharton as he finally entered the warehouse. Hiri, turning around, only now became aware of that two-meter long boulder descending towards the warehouse. His face immediately turned white.

"Lie down!" Linley roared angrily, his face fierce.

Wharton had never seen his big brother look so angry before, and was so terrified that he immediately lay down. His eyes filled with tears, he looked at Linley and mumbled, "Big brother..." But with a flying hug, Linley tackled Wharton and covered him with his own body.

Almost just at that instant...

"CRASH!"

The sound of the boulder crashing into the warehouse. That enormous boulder had smashed into the warehouse roof with terrifying power. Although the stone roof of the warehouse was sturdy, when slammed into by such a huge boulder, it still broke apart. Even the floor of the warehouse was shattered apart by the vibrations from that collision.

"Young master—" Housekeeper Hiri's eyes immediately turned red. The battle-qi in his body exploded, and like a bolt of red lightning, he flew towards them. Using his own body as a protective barrier, he also used his two hands to push at a huge piece of the falling roof which was going to fall on Linley's body. Hiri and that collapsing ceiling arrived next to Linley at almost the same time.

"Rumble, rumble..."

In the blink of an eye, Wharton, Linley, and Hiri were totally trapped and pressed down under the falling rubble.

Hogg was in the courtyard, wielding an enormous sword, deflecting one boulder after another. But when he turned his head towards Linley, he saw Linley risk everything to protect Wharton, and then Housekeeper Hiri fly towards them to protect them both. His mind immediately went blank.

The warehouse collapsed, and rubble poured down into it.

"Linley!" Hogg's eyes turned red.

Right now, there was no way for Hogg to tell if Hiri had managed to position himself in front of Linley in time, or if the falling rocks had slammed into Linley first.

## Chapter 17- Catastrophe (part 2)

"Thud! Thud! Thud!"

A few more crashing sounds continued to sound out from within Wushan township, but a short period of time later, no more stones fell from the sky. All of the boulders had been thoroughly demolished by the green-robed swordsman. But by now, no one in Wushan township had any spare energy left to pay attention to their battle.

"Lord Hogg, Wushan township is in bad shape. Just then-....Lord Hogg? What's wrong?" Hillman rushed into the manor. Just as he was beginning to report on the

town's situation, he saw that Hogg was standing there in a daze, not making a single sound.

Hogg's body trembled. Only then did he regain his usual faculties. "Linley." Hogg charged violently towards the warehouse at an astonishing speed. Seeing this, Hillman guessed what had happened and immediately followed Hogg.

"Smash!" Before Hogg had arrived, the rubble covering Hiri, Linley, and Wharton had been blasted apart.

Housekeeper Hiri stood up from within the rubble.

"Uncle Hiri, what's the situation?" Hogg's voice was trembling. At the same time, he stared at the prone bodies. The first thing he saw was Linley, head covered with blood. The sight of the blood was so piercing to the eye that Hogg felt his head grow foggy, and his body swayed, almost falling down.

Up til now, Linley's body was still elevated from the ground, as he had been using his fists in a push-up position, so as not to crush Wharton.

"Father." A youthful voice emanated from beneath.

Wharton slowly crawled out from under Linley. His body was small, and he had been fully covered by Linley, so he didn't experience any injuries at all.

"Big brother, big brother, what's wrong?" Wharton tugged at Linley's body.

"Linley. Linley!" Hogg's voice was quavering.

Housekeeper Hiri said from off to the side, "I was still a little too slow. There was one piece of rubble that I managed to block, but before it struck young master Linley in the head. Although I believe that the strike shouldn't have been too heavy."

"I...I'm fine." A low, hoarse voice. Linley forced himself to lift up his head and stare at Hogg, managing a weak smile.

At this moment, upon seeing Linley's smile, Hogg's tears came spilling out.

Linley straightened his body and sat up. His clothes were covered with blood, as was his face and his hair. When the stone had struck him, it had caused a great deal of blood loss. At the moment, Linley also felt slightly woozy. Still staring at his father, Linley said in a weak, low voice, "Father, you are crying."

"I, I'm fine." An excited smile appeared on Hogg's face.

"Wharton? Why were you at the doorway earlier?" Linley rubbed his little brother's head and said in a reprobating tone.

Wharton also knew that he had made a mistake. Lowering his head, he said, "Big brother, I'm sorry."

Housetaker Hiri, off to the side, said, "This was my fault. This disaster came too suddenly, and as soon as I had taken Wharton into the warehouse, I saw young master Linley in great danger, so I immediately rushed forward to help him. I didn't imagine that in just that instant, a huge boulder would head for the warehouse. This was my fault."

"RUMBLE!"

Suddenly, a huge tremblor shook the earth.

Everyone's facial expressions changed as they stared towards the eastern sky. A giant had appeared, hovering in the sky, over ten meters tall, muscles bound tightly, with a ruthless expression on its face. Its entire body was the color of yellow earth. At the moment, this earthen giant was engaging in a fierce battle with the green robed swordsman, and their every exchange of blows created a sound like crashing lightning or roaring thunder.

The sound of the blows alone gave testament to how mighty the earthen giant was. Every single one of its blows was more powerful than the combined force of those countless boulders from earlier.

Linley stared at this battle in awe. "This earthen giant must have been conjured by the magic of the gray-robed magus." Linley could easily come to this conclusion, since the gray-robed magus was a mighty magus, after all.

"Linley, how are you feeling?" Hogg said with concern.

Linley squeezed out a smile. "I'm fine. There's just a cut on my head, is all. I just lost some blood."

"Young master Linley, you actually lost quite a bit of blood. If you lose too much, you could die." Housekeeper Hiri immediately retrieved some white gauze from within the warehouse and wrapped it around the injury on Linley's head.

Hogg took a close look at Linley. "Uncle Hiri, how does his injury look?"

Uncle Hiri smiled at Hogg. "Not bad. Linley is in excellent physical shape, and he hasn't fainted. There shouldn't be too much to worry about. In the coming days, he just needs to eat more meat to replenish his blood, and he'll be fine."

Only now did Hogg secretly let go of a breath he had been holding.

Just then, when he saw Linley charge over to protect Wharton, Hogg had truly been scared silly. He had truly been terrified that his sons would've died, just like that.

After taking a deep breath, Hogg looked at Hillman. "Right, Hillman, you were just saying that Wushan township was in bad shape. How bad of a shape is it in?"

"I can't say with exact precision as to how bad the condition is," Hillman said, his face grim. "But from what I could see, some people must have died, and many were injured or even crippled! This catastrophe came simply too quickly. Even though I shouted for everyone to hide, many people didn't have the chance to barricade themselves in their cellars."

"It really did come too fast." Hogg turned his head to stare at the eastern sky.

Saint-level combatants were on a totally different level than the people of Wushan township. A Saint-level combatant could wipe out the entire town with the wave of a hand. Earlier, the rain of boulders and the green-robed man's destruction of said boulders was nothing but the opening gambits of these two combatants.

But even the side effects of just those initial, testing blows were enough to cause an utter catastrophe to Wushan township.

"The legendary earth-style incantation of the tenth rank, a forbidden spell – the earth element 'World Protector'. The power of this 'World Protector' is extremely terrifying. It's considered the most powerful offensive spell available to an earth-style magus." Staring at the earthen giant, Hogg's face had grown cold as he spoke.

Hogg was a member of the Dragonblood Warrior clan. Although the Dragonblood Warrior clan had fallen on hard times, their five thousand years of history meant that within their family archives, there was information about all of the most powerful magical attacks used by the most powerful people in history. Hogg naturally could tell what was going on at a glance.

"An incantation of the tenth rank..." Linley took a deep breath.

Linley badly wanted to one day also ride a Black Dragon and utilize apocalyptic incantations of the tenth rank. His thoughts naturally turned to the magical testing

and recruiting event. "The test will only be held in autumn in the capital. There's still half a year left..."

From the bottom of his heart, Linley was eagerly awaiting the magical ability examination in half a year.

"Hillman, in a little while, accompany me in inspecting the situation of the residents of Wushan township." Hogg said, and then looked at Hiri. "Uncle Hiri, after these two Saint-level combatants depart, take Linley home to change his clothes and make sure he gets some rest."

"Yes, lord." Hiri nodded.

Hogg turned back to look at Linley, who was enraptured watching the exciting battle between two Saint-level combatants. Laughing, he said, "Oh, Linley, you little rascal. Even though you are injured, you still want to watch Saint-level combatants fight. Fortunately, given that the Saint-level magus has unleashed the 'World Protector', this battle is about to come to a close soon."

Absorbed in the shocking battle going on off in the distant, Linley didn't notice at all that around his chest area....

Since his head was injured, the so-called 'Coiling Dragon' ring he wore underneath his clothes had also been stained by blood. But the blood on the Coiling Dragon ring seemed to have disappeared, like water into an endless ocean, as the strange black material slowly absorbed it all.

And then, the Coiling Dragon ring actually began to shine with a faint, dim light.

But since it was being worn underneath his clothes, no one could possibly notice the faint light coming off from the surface of the Coiling Dragon ring.

## Chapter 18 - The Coiling Dragon Spirit (part 1)

In the eastern sky, the gray-robed man still stood on the head of the Black Dragon which lay coiled in the sky. A self-assured smile was on his face, as he watched the green-robed man battle against his earthen giant.

"Sschhhhwiing!"

A piercing sound split the air as the green-robed man's sword pierced directly into the earthen giant's head. "Rumble!" The earthen giant's head split apart, but the

earthen giant didn't collapse. It's boulder-like fists directly slammed onto the green-robed man's body.

"Ah!" Then green-robed man spat out a mouthful of blood, his entire face turning ashen white.

And then, the earthen giant's shattered head began to reform and regenerate, as though no damage had been done at all!

"Dillon, you'd best just hand it over. The World Protector that I summoned isn't something that you can overcome." The gray-robed man riding the Black Dragon said calmly.

The green-robed man stared coldly at the gray-robed man. He suddenly said in a fierce voice, "Rudi, if I can't have it, then you won't either!" A bright green light began to shine from within the green-robed man's hands. Upon seeing this, the gray-robed man who had previously been standing so calmly on the head of the Black Dragon immediately grew startled and anxious. "Stop!"

"Splatter!"

The green-robed man's arms suddenly shone as bright as the sun. An explosive sound could be heard, and then immediately disappeared.

"Dillon, you-!" The gray-robed man pointed angrily at the green-robed man, but couldn't say anything.

The green-robed man's face was ashen white as he stared at the gray-robed man, whose face had also turned white. "Now, nobody has it. Rudi, I've been injured, but if you want to kill me, that's still going to be quite hard to accomplish!" With a cold laugh, the green-robed man transformed into a beam of green light as he flew off at a fast speed into the northeastern skies.

The gray-robed man watched him fly off. He only frowned, and did not pursue.

The earthen giant by the gray-robed man's side also slowly disappeared.

"The 'Stellar Sword Saint' Dillon? Pity. I can't kill him yet." The gray-robed man said in a low voice. And then the Black Dragon underneath his feet, as though knowing his master's wishes, flapped its enormous wings and went flying off into the southeastern direction.

In the blink of an eye, these two Saint-level combatants had disappeared.

But Wushan township was still filled with the sight of utter devastation. Nearly a thousand houses had collapsed, and screams of pain, angry curses, and sorrowful, pain-filled cries filled the air. In a short period of time, the previously peaceful township had turned into a disaster area.

.....

Within the Baruch clan manor courtyard, there was only Hogg.

Hogg was seated at a table, his forehead furrowed. As the controller of Wushan township, he absolutely had to think carefully about how to take care of his people.

Footsteps. Uncle Hiri emerged from within the living room. "Lord."

"How is Linley?" Hogg immediately turned his head and asked.

Hiri chuckled. "Lord, please be at ease. I've already washed and cleaned young master Linley's wounds, then re-bandaged them. I've made him eat a big meal, and then change his clothes and go to bed. By the time he wakes up, he'll be much better."

Only now did Hogg feel relieved, and he nodded. But his forehead was still furrowed.

"Lord, are you worrying about the people of Wushan township?" Hiri asked.

Hogg nodded. Smiling wryly, he said, "Uncle Hiri, most of the people in Wushan township aren't like us. Wushan township's men won't be too bad off, as most of them are warriors of the first or second rank, but the women aren't. For so many boulders to come raining from the skies non-stop, it would be hard for them to block any at all!"

Hiri nodded as well.

The number of people in Wushan township who were able to utilize 'battle-qi' could be counted on one hand. Just now, thousands of rocks had descended from the heavens. If people hadn't managed to hide in cellars early on, or use thick shields to block, then as soon as the stones came crashing down...

"There's nothing we can do now, aside from waiting on Hillman's report." Hogg felt extremely restless.

After a long time, urgent, rushed footsteps could be heard entering the manor.

Hogg's eyes brightened. Turning, he saw Hillman striding quickly into the manor.

"Hillman, what's the situation in Wushan township?" Hogg quickly asked.

Hillman let out a pain-filled sigh. "We just ran some calculations. Over three hundred people died, and a thousand were injured." The entire township only had a population of five thousand. This meant the casualty ratio was about 20%! And this was for those who lived in stone houses. This really was a disaster.

"So many casualties?" Hogg couldn't help but begin to grow worried.

Food was the lifeblood of any nation, and a small town was the same. For their workforce to suddenly decrease dramatically, but the number of injured and crippled to skyrocket...the economic situation of the town was going to worsen even further.

"Ugh!" Hogg let out a long sigh.

He wanted to lower their taxes, but Wushan township's tax rate was already very low. Right now, his own clan's survival had already become a problem. How could he assist the commoners of the town? The situation was different from those other towns, where taxes were so high that many commoners died of exhaustion and misery.

"Lord Hogg, all the commoners in Wushan township greatly appreciate your kindness and generosity. Everybody knows how much you have done for us. Please don't be too vexed." Hillman said from the side.

Hillman himself was born in Wushan township.

Based on his status as a warrior of the sixth rank, even in the capital, he could be the guard captain for a noble family. But because Hillman felt gratitude towards the Baruch clan due to their kindness and generosity, after Hillman retired from his army career, he directly became the captain of the guard for this decaying old noble Baruch clan.

"Hillman, lead the guard squad to do some more scouting about the township. Uncle Hiri, go and get some rest." Hogg directly instructed.

"Yes, lord." Hillman said.

Housekeeper Hiri also bowed respectfully and departed. After Hillman also left the pavilion, once again, the only person left remaining was Hogg.

....

Within Linley's bedroom.

Due to Linley's head injury, Hiri had instructed everybody not to bother Linley and to let him get some rest. While Wushan township was a whirlwind of activity, Linley's bedroom was peaceful and quiet. Linley himself had been drawn deeply into a world of dreams.

"Ding!"

A gentle, chime-like sound could be heard as rays of light began to leak out from Linley's chest area. And then, a cage of light surrounded the pitch-black Coiling Dragon ring, which slowly flew out from under Linley's pajamas and began to hover roughly ten centimeters away from him.

The ring began trembling more strongly, and the glow from the Coiling Dragon ring began to grow as well.

Fortunately, there was no one in Linley's bedroom right now. Anyone entering the room would have been stunned. Linley, however, was still blissfully asleep, and didn't notice at all that the Coiling Dragon ring was now floating.

"Ting!" The glow surrounding the Coiling Dragon ring suddenly began to contract rapidly, and then a single ray of hazy light flew out from within the ring. Descending next to Linley's bed, it transformed into a person's image.

The image was of an amiable looking old gentleman with moon-white robes and a long white beard.

At this point in time, the Coiling Dragon ring directly fell back onto Linley's chest, powerless. Linley's eyelids flickered, and then slowly opened. Upon seeing an old man whom he had never met before at the head of his bed, he couldn't help but feel shocked. "You...who are you?!"

"Hello, kiddo. My name is Doehring Cowart [De'lin Ke'wo'te]. I am a Saint-level Grand Magus of the Pouant [Pu'ang] Empire!" The amiable looking old man said with a smile.

Linley's eyes suddenly turned round. "You...you are a Saint-level magus instructor?"

The white-haired old man nodded confidently.

"No way. Gramps, you just said you are from the Pouant Empire. The Pouant Empire that was eradicated over five thousand years ago?" Linley was quite familiar with the history of the world, and he knew very well that the Pouant Empire had

ceased to exist before his own clan had even came to be. In the modern era, the Pouant Empire was not one of the four great empires of the world.

## Chapter 19– The Coiling Dragon Spirit (part 2)

The Pouant Empire had lasted for an extremely long period of time, and had been erected over eight thousand years ago. The entire Pouant Empire had lasted for three thousand years, but in the end, it was still destroyed. The domain which the Pouant Empire had previously held sway over was approximately the combined borders of the Holy Union and the Dark Alliance.

In other words...

The entire Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, the twelve kingdoms, and the thirty-two duchies all once belonged to the Pouant Empire. From this alone, one could tell what a vast empire it had been.

But the Pouant Empire had been destroyed long ago!

“Over five thousand years ago?” The white-haired old man was momentarily stunned, and then let out a sigh. “There’s no way for me to sense the passing of time from within the Worldring. I didn’t expect that by the time I left the Worldring, over five thousand years would have passed since the destruction of my country.”

“Gramps, what are you talking about? I’m confused.”

Linley felt as though his entire mind had been turned muddy. This old grandpa had suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and claimed that he was a Grand Magus from the era of the Pouant Empire, which had been destroyed five thousand years ago. What could be more ridiculous than this?

Linley even wondered if he was in a dream!

“Kid.” The white-haired old man looked at Linley. Smiling, he said, “The ring you wear next to your chest is the Divine artifact I once used – the Worldring!”

“Wait, wait, wait!”

Linley immediately peered up at him and said, “What ‘Worldring’? This ring around my chest was left behind by elders of my ancestral clan. Its name is the ‘Coiling Dragon Ring’!”

"Coiling Dragon Ring? It was originally named the Coiling Dragon Ring?" The old man said in surprise.

Linley was stunned.

"Original name? What do you mean, original name?" Linley looked questioningly at the old man.

Only now did the old man begin to laugh. "Oh, 'Coiling Dragon Ring' must be the name you gave it. Or perhaps the name an elder of yours gave it. When I originally discovered this ring, I searched through all sorts of documents but couldn't find any information about it. Thus I gave myself the authority to title it the Worldring. But as to what it was originally called, even I have no idea."

"Oh, gramps, you chose the name for it yourself as well. But now it belongs to me, and I named it the Coiling Dragon Ring." Linley was quite stubborn.

"Fine, fine, call it the Coiling Dragon Ring if you wish." The old man chuckled, not wanting to debate with Linley.

"Gramps, can you tell me why you just appeared from within the Coiling Dragon Ring?" Linley questioned.

The old man smiled. "In year 4280 of the Yulan calendar, I—"

Upon hearing this, Linley was secretly shocked. "Year 4280? This year is year 9990!"

"In year 4280 of the Yulan calendar, I encountered an old foe of mine, a Saint-level Grand Magus named Hamelin [Ha'mu'lin], and the two of us began to fight. I didn't expect yet a second Saint-level combatant to ambush me and sneak attack me. In the end, I was defeated, and my body was destroyed. I didn't wish for my spirit to be captured and tortured by my enemy, Hamelin, so I sealed myself within this Worldri-, ahem, this Coiling Dragon Ring." The old man explained what had happened in the past.

"The Coiling Dragon Ring is an extremely amazing object. It doesn't appear to emanate any magical aura, but in usefulness it can even compare with Divine artifacts. When I sealed my soul within the ring, Hamelin and the other searched a long time for me, but weren't able to find me. This, too, is thanks to the Coiling Dragon Ring." The old man smiled as he spoke.

Linley secretly nodded.

The Coiling Dragon Ring, by appearances, really did look quite plain. As the member of an ancient clan, Linley had a rather appraising eye.

Normally, precious items would have at least some sort of elemental aura. But this Coiling Dragon Ring seemed like nothing more than plain, inert wood.

"Gramps, you said that five thousand years ago, you were ambushed by a Saint-level Grand Magus and a Saint-level combatant, and then you were self-sealed within this ring? And that this ring is an artifact which is comparable in power to a Divine artifact?" Linley finally said.

"Right." Seeing that Linley understood, the old man couldn't help but smile and nod.

"Then Gramps, how is it that you appeared from within the ring just now?" Linley looked doubtfully at the old man.

Laughing, the old man explained, "Actually, when I sealed my spirit within the Coiling Dragon Ring, I interwove my very existence into the Coiling Dragon Ring. Only when a person becomes the new owner of the ring would I be allowed to depart it."

"Becomes the new owner of the ring?"

"Right. Through dripping blood onto the Coiling Dragon Ring." The old man laughed.

Linley frowned while mumbling, "Dripping blood onto the ring?" Frowning as he tried to recollect when that had happened, Linley suddenly remembered that when the rock had cut his head open, fresh blood had suffused his clothes and his chest. Most likely, it was around then that the blood had dripped onto the ring.

"Oh. Then that makes me the owner of the Coiling Dragon Ring." Linley nodded.

"Right. Only now, after you became the owner of the Coiling Dragon Ring, am I able to depart the ring and once more experience the air of the Yulan continent." A hint of a smile was on the old man's face. "Right. Kid. I just told you my name, but what is yours?"

Linley smiled brightly. "My name is Linley! Linley Baruch!"

"Linley, a fine name." The old man smiled.

"Gramps, are you going to be forever bound to the ring and unable to ever regain your freedom?" Linley felt rather bad for him.

The old man smiled and nodded. "Linley, you must know that when most people die, their spirits will enter the Nether Realm! But because I was a Saint-level Grand Magus at the time of my death, my mental energy had obtained physical form. That was the only reason why I could temporarily resist the call of the Nether Realm and seal myself within the Coiling Dragon Ring. Right now, there is only one way for me to leave this ring – exhaust all of my remaining mental energy."

"Exhaust all your remaining mental energy?" Linley didn't quite understand.

"What men called mental energy, ghosts might call 'spiritual energy'. When a person's mental energy was utterly exhausted, his soul would naturally dissipate. In other words...when my soul dissipates, it will leave the confines of this Coiling Dragon Ring." The old man said calmly. "But the current situation is fine also. Although I am confined by the Coiling Dragon Ring, preventing me from ranging more than three meters away from it, this isn't too bad."

Linley's heart trembled.

Suddenly, in his heart, Linley felt some pity for this old man.

"Heh heh, Linley, I'm already very satisfied. You don't know this, but...if my spirit had been captured by Hamelin, it would have been a fate worse than death." The old man sighed.

"Gramps, you said your name is Doehring Cowart? Can I address you as Grandpa Doehring?" Linley suddenly said.

Doehring Cowart was a mighty Grand Magus of the Pouant Empire, and thus had an extremely high personal status. Back then, he would have ranked amongst the top five personages in the Yulan continent. He fell only because he had been despicably ambushed by Grand Magus Hamelin and another Saint-level combatant.

However...

Doehring Cowart had never had a child, nor grandchildren. Upon hearing Linley address him as Grandpa Doehring, Doehring Cowart's heart, which had been lonely for thousands of years, suddenly felt warm.

"Yes, yes." Doehring Cowart felt extremely happy.

A look of excitement suddenly appeared in Linley's eyes. "Grandpa Doehring, just now, you said that you are a Saint-level Grand Magus. Then, can you teach me how to use magic?" Linley's heart was frantically pounding. The person in front of him was a five thousand year old Saint-level Grand Magus.

In Linley's mind, the huge body of the Velocidragon, the terrifying spectacle of the Dance of the Fire Serpents, and the countless boulders falling from the sky began to play over and over again, along with the spectacle of that proud man who stood on top of the Black Dragon.

He deeply desired that one day...

He, too, would step on top of the head of a Black Dragon and make the heavens tremble.

Doehring Cowart stroked his white beard. His eyes shining, he said, "Of course I can! Your Grandpa Doehring is a Saint-level Grand Magus of the almighty earth style...and amongst all of the elements, the element of earth is the mightiest of them all!" As he began to discuss magic, Doehring Cowart began to get excited.

## Chapter 20- Earth-Style Magic (part 1)

Linley's anticipation was about to erupt like a volcano as he immediately became suffused with excitement.

"Grandpa Doehring, can you really teach me to become a magus?" Linley excitedly looked up at old man Doehring.

Doehring Cowart, seeing the state Linley was in, stroked his white beard. "Linley, your Grandpa Doehring is a Saint-level Grand Magus. Even if you don't have much natural talent, I can still teach you magic. Of course...if your talent is low, your accomplishments will be low as well."

If any other magus had been present and heard his words, they would have been astonished.

Amongst the society of magi, the most important thing is talent. No talent meant no possibility of becoming a magus. Many people believed this!

But Doehring Cowart dared to claim that even if his student's talent was poor, he still had the ability to make a magus out of the student. If anyone else had made this claim, they would be viewed as just wildly boasting...but the man who said these words was a five-thousand year old Saint-level Grand Magus!

"Low talent, low accomplishments?" Linley felt his heart tremble.

The reason he wanted to become a magus was because he wanted to restore glory to the Baruch clan. Even if he couldn't accomplish this, he hoped to at least accomplish the one task which generations of clan elders had strove to achieve for centuries – reclaiming their ancestral heirloom. If he could accomplish this, it would be enough.

But to do so, power was an important component.

"Linley, don't be worried. Your aptitude for magic hasn't even been assessed yet. Who knows if it will be high or low? Perhaps you will have a tremendous talent for magic." Doehring Cowart stroked his white beard as he smiled.

Grandpa Doehring's tranquility brought calm to Linley as well.

"Grandpa Doehring, how does one test for magical aptitude?" Linley couldn't help but grow eager.

"It is actually quite easy to test for magical aptitude." Just as Doehring Cowart spoke, suddenly –

Footsteps could be heard from outside the door. Hearing them, Linley immediately grew nervous. He quickly said to Doehring Cowart, "Grandpa Doehring, quick, hide. Someone is coming." If this five-thousand year old Saint-level Grand Magus of the bygone Pouant Empire was discovered, it could be disastrous.

Doehring Cowart only smiled, not moving at all.

"Grandpa Doehring!" Linley was beginning to grow impatient.

"Creaaak." The bedroom door swung open, and Housekeeper Hiri stuck his head inside. Seeing that Linley was awake, he couldn't help but smile. "Young master Linley, I didn't expect that you would have already awoken. How do you feel, young master?"

Linley immediately forced out a smile. Nodding, he said, "Thank you for asking, Uncle Hiri. I'm much better now."

Linley felt extremely agitated. He couldn't help but turn to look in the direction of Doehring Cowart, but Doehring Cowart was still standing there, grinning. "What's going on with Grandpa Doehring? Ugh. We're about to get discovered. It's going to be so annoying to have to explain."

"Young master Linley, it's time for dinner. Since you are already awake, come eat dinner with us." Uncle Hiri smiled as he spoke.

"Oh. Got it." Linley snuck another peek at Doehring Cowart, his heart filled with questions. "What's going on. From Uncle Hiri's expression, it seems as though he can't see Grandpa Doehring at all."

Seeing Linley constantly glance at the corner of his bed, Uncle Hiri asked curiously, "Young master Linley, why are you staring at the side of your bed? Did you drop something? I can help you look for it."

"No-, nothing." Linley immediately crawled out of bed. "Uncle Hiri, let's go eat dinner."

Although he found Linley's reaction to be a bit odd, Uncle Hiri didn't think too much of it, just nodding and smiling. Linley dressed himself, but still couldn't help but sneak a peek at Doehring Cowart. But just as he did so, Doehring Cowart, who was still grinning at him, suddenly disappeared from Linley's field of vision.

"He entered the Coiling Dragon Ring." Linley could now clearly feel that a spirit was now residing within the Coiling Dragon Ring.

Unlike in the past, Linley had now soulbound the ring with his own blood, giving him a deeper level of understanding.

"Linley, no need to speak aloud. Just speak to me mentally. As the master of the Coiling Dragon Ring, you can directly engage in spiritual communication with me, as I am a spirit within the ring." Doehring Cowart's voice rang out in Linley's mind.

This greatly surprised Linley.

"Grandpa Doehring?" Linley tested the mental link.

"I hear you." Doehring Cowart's voice rang out in Linley's mind as well.

Linley's heart was immediately filled with joy. But as he engaged in conversation with Doehring Cowart, he didn't pay attention to where he walked, and he tripped over the doorway. Uncle Hiri, walking ahead of him, turned and laughed. "Young master Linley, watch where you walk."

"Got it, Uncle Hiri," Linley laughed in reply.

While excitedly engaging in mental conversation with Doehring Cowart, Linley entered the dining room and sat down. Today's dinner was actually quite sumptuous, including a fragrant smelling roasted sheep. Hogg glanced at Linley. Smiling, he said, "Linley, have some." As he spoke, Hogg personally tore off a strip of meat from the sheep's lower hindlegs for Linley.

"Thank you, father."

Linley felt quite surprised. His family was in poor economic straits, so normally their dinner was quite spartan. But today, they even had roast sheep?

What Linley didn't know was...when the rain of stones descended on the town, aside from men and women, even many animals were killed. The Baruch clan aside, even some poor families who rarely ate meat were enjoying an extravagant meal today.

"Grandpa Doehring, why didn't Uncle Hiri see you just then?" Linley mentally asked Doehring Cowart.

"Linley, I must inform you that aside from you, nobody can see me. Because right now, I'm just a spiritual projection, which has no matter. I'm invisible to the eye. Only you, as the master of the Coiling Dragon Ring, can see me." Doehring Cowart explained in detail.

Linley suddenly understood.

Previously, Grandpa Doehring had said that he had died long ago, and only his spirit now remained.

"Grandpa Doehring, in the future, doesn't that mean you can always appear by my side?" Linley felt extremely happy.

Just as Linley spoke, he saw that next to him, a white-haired old man suddenly appeared out of nowhere. It was Doehring Cowart. But Hogg, Housekeeper Hiri, and his younger brother Wharton still continued to eat and chat, not noticing Doehring Cowart's existence in the slightest.

"Wow..."

Hearing and seeing were two different things. When he personally witnessed all the other people at the dinner table be unaware of Grandpa Doehring's presence, Linley felt deeply astonished.

"There's still some people who can sense my presence. Those whose spiritual presence are on par with me can feel my presence. But naturally...if I hide within the Coiling Dragon Ring, they definitely won't be able to sense me." Doehring Cowart's voice sounded within Linley's head.

"On the same spiritual level as Grandpa Doehring?" Linley chewed and thought at Doehring Cowart at the same time.

"Those who have the same spiritual power as me are most likely Saint-level combatants. Only Saint-level combatants can sense my presence, if barely. But of course, the prerequisite is that I appear outside the Coiling Dragon Ring. Once I enter the ring, there is no way they can find me." Doehring Cowart smiled as he spoke.

Linley mentally nodded as he grabbed a roasted leg of mutton and chewed on it.

"Linley, eat more slowly." Hogg saw how fast Linley was eating and couldn't help but laugh.

Linley grinned at his father, but continued to devour his food with haste. In the twinkling of an eye, he had stripped the leg of mutton of all flesh. Linley let out a comfortable burp, then used the napkin to wipe his lips. Standing, he said, "Father, Uncle Hiri, I'm done eating. I feel like my head is still a bit dizzy, so I'm going to go and get some more rest. Wharton, see ya." Linley was the first to finish eating.

"Still feeling dizzy? Then go and get some rest." Hogg hurriedly said.

The earlier events of the morning had left a lasting impression on Hogg. There was a moment when he even thought Linley had been crushed to death. After experiencing such an event, Hogg's attitude towards Linley clearly had improved substantially.

"Big brother, see ya." Chubby little Wharton waved at Linley with a grease-covered hand.

## **Chapter 21- Earth-Style Magic (part 2)**

Linley ran directly back to his room, and then tightly shut the door behind him.

He quickly removed his shoes, then jumped onto the bed and sat down. "Grandpa Doehring, come out now. Help me test my magical aptitude." Linley was extremely impatient. When he was eating dinner just now, all of his thoughts were turned towards this.

A misty ray of light shot out from within the ring, falling onto the floor and transforming into Doehring Cowart.

Grinning, Doehring Cowart said, "Linley, don't be so impatient. First, I must tell you that because I don't have any specialized magical aptitude testing equipment with me, I can only test whether or not you have any talent for earth-style magic. Since I

have no tools, there's no way for me to test and see if you have aptitude for any other magic."

"You can only test for my aptitude for earth element magic?" Linley felt a little disappointed.

He had also heard that in order to test for magical aptitude, special tools were needed, but since Grandpa Doehring was a Saint-level Grand Magus, Linley had been hoping Doehring might have some special methods.

"What's wrong with the earth style? Linley, let me tell you, amongst the elements of earth, fire, water, wind, thunder, light, and darkness, earth is the mightiest style of them all." A look of pride was on Doehring Cowart's face. Clearly, he was filled with confidence. After all, he was a Saint-level Grand Magus of the earth element style.

Linley found this somewhat hard to believe.

Each style should be equal. How could the earth style be the mightiest?

"Grandpa Doehring, I heard that fire-style elemental attacks are the most powerful? And that darkness-style elemental attacks are the most unpredictable? How could the earth style be the mightiest?" Linley frowned.

The formerly amiable Grandpa Doehring suddenly turned angry as he grumbled, "Linley, let me tell you that when it comes to attack power, each elemental style has its strengths!"

"For example, the forbidden fire-style spell of 'Heavenly Fire Burning the Fields, Earthly Fire Burning the Cities' can burn an entire city to ashes, true. But the water-style has the forbidden spell of 'Absolute Zero', which when unleashed can freeze to death hundreds of thousands of people. Thunder-style's 'Heavenly Lightning of Absolute Destruction' can unleash tens of thousands of lightning bolts, which no one can survive. Wind-style's forbidden spell, 'Annihilating Tempest', can fill the entire sky with blade-like gusts of wind..."

Doehring Cowart let out a long sigh.

Linley's heart was trembling.

He had thought that the fire-style's attacks were the most powerful, but from the sound of it, that was an absolute joke. Every single elemental style, at the level of forbidden spells, contained astonishing destructive power.

"And earth-style?" Linley didn't forget about the earth-style elemental magic.

Doehring Cowart self-confidently said, "How could the earth-style be weak? When the earth-style's forbidden spell, 'Heavenly Meteor's Descent', is executed, countless enormous boulders will rain from the sky and reduce a city to rubble in the twinkling of an eye. It also has the forbidden spell, 'Heaven Collapses, Earth Shatters'. When this spell is used, the earth itself will begin to roil about like waves in the ocean. Houses will collapse, the earth itself will split apart, and magma will spew out from the cracks, killing countless people."

Linley didn't dare to even breathe.

"Simultaneously, the earth-style also has the wide-ranging protective spell, 'Pulsating Guard'. Once the Pulsating Guard is used, the area above, below, and around an entire city will become protected from all attacks. Even if an opponent uses the 'Heavenly Lightning of Absolute Destruction', this spell can fend it off."

Doehring Cowart began to speak faster and faster while laughing. "But of course, I'm just speaking of wide-range destructive spells, and not one-on-one battle magic."

Linley nodded.

He could tell that Grandpa Doehring was exclusively talking about wide-range, castatrophe-level magic.

"Grandpa Doehring, it seems like the earth-style has lots more forbidden spells? Why is that?" Linley said curiously.

Doehring Cowart said confidently, "Linley, there's something you aren't understanding. Actually, each elemental style is roughly balanced, but in different environments they will have different effects. For example, in the water-rich environment of the ocean, water-style magic will be extremely strong. In some places where the wind blows powerfully, wind-style magic will be very powerful as well."

Linley began to understand.

"Linley...in the entire world, isn't it true that most battles and most magi are on the earth? And when used while standing on the earth, earth-style magic is extremely effective." A smile was on Doehring Cowart's face. "As you stand firmly on the boundless earth, an earth-style magus will have an extremely effective assistant."

Linley now understood!

Each elemental style of magic was more effective in certain places.

But the battles fought by the magi of the Yulan continent were virtually all on land, meaning that earth-style magi were almost always at an advantage.

"Amongst all the styles of magic, as the earth-style allows us to absorb earth elemental essence into our bodies, earth-style has the most benefit for improving your physical form. Mother Earth is most benevolent towards us." A look of veneration was on Doehring Cowart's face. "When we earth-style magi sit upon the ground, we can feel the vastness of the earth, feel its pulse, and feel Mother Earth's love for us."

"When it comes to attacks, earth-style magic has the one-on-one 'World Protector' forbidden battle spell, and also the destructive spells of 'Heavenly Meteor's Descent' and 'Heaven Collapses, Earth Shatters'. When it comes to defense, amongst the forbidden spells, there is the wide-ranging protective spell, 'Pulsating Guard', as well as the personal protective spell, 'Earthguard'. When it comes to personal protection, nothing beats earth-style elemental spells!"

Doehring Cowart appeared very confident.

"Personal protection? Grandpa Doehring, you're saying that the earth-style has the strongest personal protection spells?" Linley looked questioningly at Doehring Cowart.

Doehring Cowart laughed as he said, "At the earliest levels, earth-style magi have access to simple spells such as a shield of earth, or a wall of earth. Upon becoming a magus of the fifth rank, you will gain access to the 'Earthguard' spell, which will continuously grow in power along with you."

"When utilized by a magus of the fifth or sixth rank, it will cover your entire body with a layer of stone armor. But upon reaching the seventh rank, it will transform into an armor of jadeite. Upon reaching the eighth rank, this Earthguard armor will be made up of crystal jade. And upon reaching the ninth rank, it will be composed of platinum. Finally, when a Saint-level magus executes the Earthguard spell, the protective armor will be made out of diamonds. The defensive power of this spell..." as he spoke, a smile appeared on Doehring Cowart's face.

Linley couldn't help but sigh inwardly.

This earth-style element really was a mighty one. When the Earthguard spell reached the Saint-level of power, it was composed entirely of diamonds! Linley knew that diamonds were an extremely hard and unyielding substance. And the 'diamonds' composing the Earthguard were no ordinary diamonds, but ones formed from magic, making them even tougher than real diamonds.

"Oh, right..."

Linley suddenly remembered the two Saint-level combatants who were fighting in the sky. He remembered how the green-robed man had landed that huge hazy sword-tip attack on the gray-robed man, whose robe shattered and revealed a diamond-like armor beneath it.

That Saint-level magus named 'Rudi' had relied on that diamond armor to block the attack by Dillon.

"That must have been a Saint-level Earthguard spell." Linley felt secretly shocked.

It was powerful enough to take a direct blow from a Saint-level combatant. From this, one could tell how powerful it was, defensively.

"This is why I told you that earth-style magic is the mightiest elemental style of them all." Doehring Cowart's white beard fluttered about, making him look all the more self-satisfied.

After all, all men survived by living on the earth. They lived on the earth, and they made war while on the earth. Naturally, earth-style magi would always have an advantage.

## Chapter 22 - Spring Ends, Autumn Comes (part 1)

Actually, all of the elemental styles, including earth-style, had their own particular strengths. But as a Saint-level Grand Magus of the earth-style, it was only natural that Doehring Cowart would strongly praise the earth-style. The eight year old Linley, upon hearing Doehring's words, was filled with eagerness.

"Grandpa Doehring, hurry up and test me and see if I have any aptitude for becoming an earth-style magus." Linley was feeling extremely anxious.

Doehring Cowart began to laugh. "Fine, I'll test you right away."

"First, let me tell you that the test for magical aptitude is a two-part test, so the test I am administering will also have two parts." Doehring Cowart was behaving in an unusually generous manner. After having been trapped along in the Coiling Dragon Ring for five thousand years, of course he was now in a wonderful mood when faced with such a cute little child.

"Magical aptitude is divided into two parts – the strength of one's magical affinity for certain elements, and the strength of one's mental energy." Doehring Cowart began to explain the basics of the test.

"What are these two parts good for?" Linley asked curiously.

Doehring Cowart said in a kindly voice, "Linley, before answering this, let me ask you, if a magus is about to cast a spell, what does he rely upon?"

"Magical incantations!" Linley immediately said.

Linley had seen how the magus who rode the Velocidragon first mumbled many magical words before casting his spell.

"Wrong."

"I've seen magi cast spells. All of them recited magical incantations first." Linley immediately argued.

Doehring Cowart stroked his white beard, and contentedly said, "When casting spells, the most important thing for a magus is his 'mageforce' and his 'mental energy'. If his mental energy is sufficiently powerful, he can even instacast spells, without need for any incantations. Magical incantations only serve a supplemental function."

"Oh? Instacast?" Linley looked questioningly at Doehring Cowart. Linley felt as though suddenly, the huge world of sorcery was slowly opening up before his very eyes, but still remained hazy and indistinct. Doehring Cowart, however, was dissipating the mysterious façade behind this world of magic.

Smiling, Doehring Cowart nodded. "Right. To cast a spell, your body must be able to provide a sufficient amount of mageforce, and then use mental energy to control that mageforce to summon sufficient elemental essence to form it into a spell!"

"Elemental essence?" Linley was surprised. "Grandpa Doehring, are you saying that in order to cast magical spells, we need to draw upon external elemental essences?"

"Haha. Of course. Linley, did you think that a powerful magus could simply rely on the elemental essence already in his body? Impossible! Let's look at forbidden-level magical spells. The mageforce in the body of a Saint-level magus can only provide 1% of the amount of essence needed. The other 99% can only be provided by natural, elemental essence."

"Let me put it to you like this...a magus' so-called 'mageforce' is really just pure, highly-refined elemental essence. Mageforce can be described as a 'general', whereas nature's elemental essence is the soldiers. A magus summons his mageforce and uses it to direct nature's elemental essence to form amazing spells. Understood?" Doehring Cowart smiled as he looked at Linley.

Linley couldn't help but frown.

"Oh...I understand." Linley laughed and nodded. "The 'mageforce' inside a magus is kinda like Uncle Hillman, while elemental essence is like our group of kids. Uncle Hillman, all by himself, directs our entire group in training, or in attacking, or engaging in battle!"

Doehring Cowart smiled and nodded. "Right. Therefore, the 'mageforce' of a magus is extremely important. If he doesn't have enough mageforce, he will not be able to cast a spell."

Linley nodded.

"Compared to mageforce, however, mental energy is even more important!" Doehring Cowart smiled as he spoke. "By now, you should have realized that so-called mental energy is really spiritual energy, a form of controlling energy!"

"Linley, a large amount of mageforce draws out an even larger amount of elemental essence. If such a huge amount of force is not controlled by spiritual energy...what do you think the end result would be?" Doehring Cowart stroked his white beard as he quietly watched Linley.

Linley frowned, pondering.

"Grandpa Doehring." Linley said in a low voice as he frowned. "In some books, I read about some military tactics. In it, one of the things it said was...to subdue an enemy, first subdue their king. For example, bandits. If you first kill the bandit leader, the bandit army will naturally crumble to pieces and fall apart. So spiritual energy should serve a similar purpose as the 'controlling energy' which the bandit leader exerts on his subordinates. Without spiritual energy to control a large amount of mageforce and elemental essence, this power would run wild."

Doehring Cowart laughed.

"Haha, Linley, you are very smart." Doehring Cowart was laughing happily.

"Right, a large amount of mageforce and elemental essence, when controlled by spiritual energy, can be formed into a spell! Sometimes, in order to execute a

particularly powerful spell, too high of a demand is placed upon one's spiritual energy. Thus, the assistance of magical incantations is needed." Doehring Cowart smiled as he spoke.

Linley felt as though a huge, important principle of magic had suddenly become crystal clear to him.

Smiling at Linley, Doehring Cowart continued, "Of course, that's just the basic theory. The world of magic is far more complicated than you can imagine! The question of exactly how one uses mageforce and elemental essence to form 'magic', now that's the real issue!"

"What's the point of having mageforce, if you don't know exactly how to shape it into a magical spell?" Doehring Cowart let out a long sigh. "The world of magic is an extremely complicated one. Magical research is very difficult and dangerous. But due to intra-empire struggles, countless magi engage in the research of new types of spells."

"Actually, every single empire researches new ways of using different matrices of mageforce and elemental essence to produce different spells! But magical research is extremely dangerous. The more destructive a spell potentially is, the harder it is to research. Sometimes, it can even catastrophically backlash upon the researchers."

Doehring Cowart laughed as he spoke. "In most magus academies, you can only study spells up to the sixth rank. Spells of the seventh, eighth, and ninth ranks, as well as Saint-level spells, are considered secrets. Only if you join a kingdom will you gain access to those special spells."

Linley had read many books and therefore understood this principle.

"If you have no instructor? No matter how much mageforce you have or how high your spiritual energy is, you won't be able to execute a single spell!" Doehring Cowart smiled faintly. "The profound secrets of every magical spell lies in how to control mageforce and elemental essence to form the spell."

"After countless years of magical experimentation, the magical system has essentially been perfected." Stroking his white beard, Doehring Cowart laughed loudly. "Linley, don't worry. In the future, there's no need for you to bend the knee to any kingdom or any lord, because...I can teach you seventh, eighth, ninth, and even Saint-level spells!"

Linley took a deep breath.

He could feel himself embarking on a new path.

Under the guidance of Grandpa Doehring, he had no need to continue to follow the path of the warrior. He would now embark on the more mysterious, more powerful way of the magus.

"Come, let's begin the test of the strength of your elemental affinities. Sit down with legs crossed, close your eyes, and enter a meditative state." Doehring Cowart said gently.

"Meditative state?" Linley felt his heartbeat quicken.

How would his affinity rate?

"Don't worry. Just carefully try and see what you can sense, and whenever you sense something, just tell me." Doehring Cowart smiled encouragingly towards Linley. Linley immediately closed his eyes and tried to force himself to calm down.

"Don't worry. Just do as I instruct." Doehring Cowart said in a gentle voice.

.....

Meditation was one of the basic underpinnings of all magus'. It was needed for both absorbing elemental essence to transform it into mageforce, and for improving one's spiritual energy. The first time entering a meditative state was the most difficult and dangerous one, but of course, under the guidance of a Saint-level Grand Magus, Linley wouldn't find it too difficult.

After half an hour of instruction, Linley finally entered the meditative state for the first time.

Seeing Linley in a meditative state, Doehring Cowart let out a faint smile, then waved his hand.

Immediately...

A large amount of earth essence began to swirl around Linley. Normally, most places only had an ordinary density of earth essence, but right now, Doehring Cowart was using his powerful spiritual energy to increase the density of earth essence near Linley by a hundredfold.

"If he still can't sense any earth essence around him even under these conditions, then there's no hope for him at all." Doehring Cowart said to himself.

Even a totally ordinary person should sense something, given that the density of earth essence was a hundred times greater than normal.

Right now, Linley, still in a meditative state, felt extremely happy and excited. He had never realized...that around him, there were so many amazing things. Countless earth-colored specks of light were floating around him, in such a high density as to be shocking.

## Chapter 23- Spring Ends, Autumn Comes (part 2)

"Linley, can you feel it?" Doehring Cowart's voice gently sounded in Linley's mind.

"Grandpa Doehring, I can feel it. There's so many specks of earth-colored light. So many...too many. They are clustered so densely, thousands, no, tens of thousands. A hundred earth-colored specks of light just floated past my hand. There's too many." Feeling the large amount of earth-colored specks of light floating around him, Linley felt extremely happy.

Hearing this news, Doehring Cowart was immediately ecstatic.

"Very good. Now, slowly, do as I say. Don't think about anything. Quietly..." Doehring Cowart droned almost hypnotically, helping Linley to depart the meditative state. At the same time, he released the control he was exerting over the earth essence. Immediately, the earth essence density around them returned to normal.

After awakening from the meditative state, Linley felt as though he was full of energy, totally different from before. Even while fully awake, Linley felt as though he could still sense some of the oscillations from the nearby earth essences, even though he couldn't sense them as clearly as when he was in the meditative state.

"Grandpa Doehring, I can still feel the movements of those earth-colored specks of light. Really! Even though it's not as clear now, I can still somewhat feel them." Linley was feeling extremely excited.

This was his first step into the world of magic. Linley was filled with amazement.

"What did you say? You can still sense it?" Doehring Cowart was very astonished, because the nearby density of earth essence had returned to normal now, and Linley was no longer in a meditative state. If he could still sense the nearby earth essence, even while awake...then his affinity for earth essence...

"Grandpa Doehring, why aren't you talking? How is the strength of my affinity for earth elemental essence?" Linley said nervously.

Linley didn't know if he had done well or poorly.

"Good. Extremely good. Your affinity for earth elemental essence is extremely high." Doehring Cowart's face was wreathed in smiles. "Based on what I know, only perhaps one in a thousand magi would have as strong an affinity for earth elemental essence as you. Truly."

Linley felt his heart began thumping frantically. He was so excited he didn't know what to say.

"But naturally, elemental affinity is just one part. Spiritual energy is the most important of all! After all, given enough time, mageforce will naturally strengthen. But it's extremely difficult to improve the spiritual energy of a magus." Doehring Cowart said solemnly.

Linley took a deep breath and nodded.

"Now, it's time for the second test, to test your spiritual energy." Doehring Cowart looked at Linley solemnly.

Linley also knew that this test of spiritual energy was an extremely important one.

"Grandpa Doehring, what do I need to do?" Linley stared at Doehring Cowart, mentally preparing himself.

"Nothing at all." Doehring Cowart laughed.

"Uh..." Linley was startled.

"I am the spirit of the Coiling Dragon Ring, while you are the master of the Coiling Dragon Ring. I am totally capable of sensing the strength of your spirit! There's no need to test it at all. I can tell you right now!" Doehring Cowart smiled at Linley.

"I...how is my spiritual energy?" Linley held his breath.

The strength or weakness of a person's spiritual energy determined one's destiny.

"Your spiritual energy is ten times stronger than the average person of your age." Doehring Cowart smiled as he spoke.

Linley felt a sense of excitement in his heart. Ten times!

That wasn't a small number.

But Doehring Cowart continued, "Generally speaking, only one in ten thousand can become a magus, principally because there's a high requirement when it comes to spiritual energy. The absolute minimum requirement for a magus is having five times more spiritual energy than someone of the same age. Ten times puts you roughly in the middle of the pack, as far as the average magus goes."

Linley's earlier excitement was immediately dampened.

"If it was anyone else instructing you, at most you could become a magus of the fifth or sixth rank. However...since the person instructing you is me, the situation is now different." Doehring Cowart stroked his beard contentedly, a look of self-confidence in his eyes.

Linley suddenly came to the same realization.

Right. Doehring Cowart was a Saint-level Grand Magus!

"As long as you work hard, Linley, I am fully confident that you can reach the eighth rank. But as to whether or not you can become a magus of the ninth rank, or even a Saint-level magus? That will depend on your own comprehension and your experiences." Doehring Cowart said seriously. "If you do not work hard, I'm afraid you might not even become a magus of the sixth rank. At that point in time, you'll have no one else to blame."

A good instructor in magic was just one part of the equation.

The most important part was still one's own effort.

"Grandpa Doehring, please don't worry. I won't disappoint you, or my father, or the Baruch clan." At this moment, Linley's mind was filled with the image of the spirit tablet in front of the ancestral hall, and those illustrious names and stories engraved on the back.

To renew the former glory of the Baruch clan!

Linley's chest was filled with boiling heat!

"Good. Starting tomorrow, I will begin to instruct you." Doehring Cowart looked at Linley, his eyes gleaming. Right now, Doehring Cowart's body was once more emanating the self-confidence and pride which a Saint-level Grand Magus possessed!

....

Starting the very next day, Linley began to live an extremely tough, arduous life.

He couldn't reveal the existence of Doehring Cowart to his father. Every morning and evening, he still needed to attend physical training, while later in the morning, he would have his lessons with his father on politics, religion, religious rites, warfare, geography, art...and all sorts of other lessons.

Only in the afternoon, during his previously spare time, would Linley run towards Mt. Wushan, east of the township, hide in a quiet place, and begin to learn the basics of magic under the guidance of Doehring Cowart. He studied hard, while entering the meditative state to absorb and process mageforce.

In addition, each day, after eating dinner, Linley would spend a large amount of time in the meditative state.

Every day, Linley would spend only six hours sleeping. All of his other time was spent in physical training, intellectual studies, magical instruction, and meditation. Six hours of sleep a day, frankly speaking, was simply not enough. In truth, entering the meditative state was extremely taxing, far more tiring than most people's lives. Every day, Linley entered a very deep sleep for those six hours.

Filled. His time was absolutely filled.

With each day passing like this, day after day, Linley's improvement was very evident, to the point where it wasn't just improvement, but a form of transformation!

As he was hard at work training...

He experienced, for the first time, the joy of absorbing elemental essence into his body, and then transforming it into mageforce.

He experienced, for the first time, entering so deeply into the meditative state that he almost became unconscious.

And he experienced, for the first time, the excitement of performing earth-style magic, even if it was nothing more than generating a tiny 'Earth Spike' that was only twenty centimeters high.

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Hard work, day after day...

Linley's effort and the speed of his improvement caused even Doetring Cowart, that five-thousand year old Saint-level Grand Magus of the Pouant Empire, to sigh with amazement.

Due to his daily physical training exercises, Linley's body was growing sturdier and sturdier. Because he often entered the meditative state and absorbed earth essence, Linley became calmer and more tranquil. Linley's transformation caused his father Hogg and Hillman to both be amazed and overjoyed.

....

Spring ended, and autumn came. In the blink of an eye, it was now autumn.

There was only one month remaining before the magus affinity testing and recruitment event.

In the ancestral hall within the Baruch clan manor.

"Whew. All done cleaning. Time to go do some more magical training. Yesterday I actually managed to successfully execute the 'Earth Tremor' technique. That was wonderful." Right now, Linley was in an extremely good mood. He quickly strode out of the ancestral hall and closed the door.

Walking on the blue tiled steps of the stone walkway, Linley's footsteps were firm and swift, but made little sound.

This was an ability that virtually all earth-style magi possessed. Because their power was derived from the earth itself, they could mask virtually all sound from their footsteps.

"Eh?" Linley frowned.

His ears twitched as he turned and stared towards a far-off building. "I heard something?" He immediately stealthily walked in that direction. His footsteps made almost no sound. Normally, just while walking ordinarily, he could mask his footsteps. Now that he was intentionally trying to hide them, he made even less noise.

He crept closer, step by step.

When Linley reached the door to the building and took a peek inside...

"What's that?" Linley's eyes widened.

He saw a 20-centimeter long black mouse chewing on a piece of stone rubble. And then, in the blink of an eye, the black mouse appeared tens of meters away in a different direction, and began to nibble on a piece of blue tile. The black mouse's fur appeared very soft. Its eyes were guileless, and its paws were furry. In a word, it looked very cute.

It even hopped around just on its two hind legs for fun.

"What an adorable little mouse. And how amazingly fast!" Hiding by the doorway, Linley exclaimed silently.

Most mice wouldn't reach such a size, and most mouses were loathsome creatures, but this mouse seemed particularly adorable. Its eyes seemed to be full of meaning, as though they could speak. Most importantly of all...it was astonishingly fast.

"Such speed...I bet even Uncle Hillman, a warrior of the sixth rank, can't catch it. How can it be so fast?" Seeing the cute mouse move tens of meters in just the blink of an eye, Linley felt astonished.

Doehring Cowart flew out from within the Coiling Dragon Ring. Standing next to Linley, he looked at the black mouse with some surprise. "A magical beast, a Shadowmouse? And judging by its size, a Shadowmouse infant."

"A magical beast? Shadowmouse? It is so big! How can it be an infant?" Linley stared at Doehring Cowart in surprise.

Aside from the Vampiric Iron Bull, the Griffin, the Velocidragon, and the Black Dragon magical beasts he had seen, this was the first time Linley had seen any other magical beasts. This adorable black mouse was actually a magical beast? A magical beast, with magical abilities?

**[End of Book 1]**